**Astronomy In Reverse**
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/12968454.

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|---|---|
| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | M/M |
| Fandom: | Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017), Marvel Cinematic Universe, Captain America (Movies) |
| Relationship: | James "Bucky" Barnes/Steve Rogers, James "Bucky" Barnes & Peter Parker, Peter Parker & Tony Stark, Peter Parker & Steve Rogers, James "Bucky" Barnes & Tony Stark |
| Character: | James "Bucky" Barnes, Peter Parker, Steve Rogers, Tony Stark, T'Challa (Marvel), James "Rhodey" Rhodes, Sam Wilson (Marvel), Baron Zemo |
| Additional Tags: | Gratuitous Superfamily, Becoming a family, Hydra being a dick, Peter is canonly adorkable, Protective Bucky Barnes, Protective Peter Parker, unfair representation of the foster care system, Fluff, canon amount of angst, amateur (but effective) equine therapy, Civil War Fix-It, bucky is a good dad, Peter is a good kid, Steve is a good boyfriend, Tony is a good friend, and also kind of a sugar daddy, without benefits, Hero Worship, Peter is majorly stanning everybody in this fic and it's cute, world's most adorable basketball |
| Series: | Part 1 of Winter!Dad |
| Stats: | Published: 2018-01-03 Completed: 2021-03-14 Chapters: 25/25 Words: 184785 |

# Astronomy In Reverse

by pansley

Summary

A year after the Winter Soldier failed his mission in DC, Bucky Barnes is doing his best to stay under the radar from both Hydra and Steve Rogers. His hope for a peaceful day-to-day life in limbo goes awry, however, when he meets Queens' newest hero; a pure-hearted kid with a death wish and a ridiculous pair of red and blue pajamas.

The last thing Steve expects when he finally tracks Bucky down is that, not only has the man been living in Queens all this time, right under his nose, but also that, in the two years since they last saw each other, Bucky somehow acquired a kid.

Alternatively: How Peter Parker effectively fucks over Bucky Barnes, and also totally saves him.

*Dramatic reenactment by fanfictionbookclub on tiktok (**WARNING:** contains spoilers)*

# Spider-Man

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It hits him suddenly and without warning. Bucky's halfway through beating the daylights out of a pathetic gang of street thugs when he realizes, with an intimate, sobering awareness, that there's probably something seriously wrong with him, personality-wise.

Sure, there's probably multiple somethings, but this one isn't from his seventy-something-year-long detour as the Winter Soldier, or from being Hydra's POW and being frozen in cryo-sleep for the better part of a century, or even from serving in WWII and living through the horrors of war.

No, this—whatever it is, personality flaw—stems from long before that, long before he'd ever held a gun, when he'd had no idea how to even shoot one.

Because there's no doubt that it *is* a flaw. It's an irrational and self-destructive behavior that he can't control. That's the goddamn *definition* of a flaw. He has no idea where it came from, only that it's been an incessant burden longer than he can remember, even if Hydra hadn't repeatedly wiped his memory.

It's aggravating, but as hard as he tries, Bucky can't suppress it. It's practically suicide to be doing this; to be fighting in the streets, where there's cameras, witnesses, potential spies, but he can't help it. It's something ingrained and inherent in him that he just can't let small, stupid people get hurt.

And fucking God, is this kid both.

He packs a punch, that much is obvious, but it's also blaringly obvious that he's never been in a real fight before, and has no idea how to pick his battles. Sure, he'd taken these thugs by surprise, but that only gave him so much leverage, since he somehow failed to notice the guys were fucking carrying.

Bucky wasn't going to intervene. He really wasn't. The whole point of being in hiding is to lay low, and after the Project Insight disaster in DC, and Hydra and Steve Rogers trying to hunt him down, Bucky had been laying as low as humanly possible.

He wasn't going to intervene. But then that asshole pulled his gun from his pocket, pointed it at the kid's head, and the kid fucking froze, rooted to the spot in his ridiculous blue and red pajamas.

The guy went to pull the trigger, and so help him God, Bucky intervened.

He knows *exactly* how stupid it is to be fighting in the open like this, especially with his arm, but it comes in handy (no pun intended) for stopping bullets from being fired into kids' brains. All he has to do is palm the muzzle. After that, the guys are no threat, and he takes them down, one by one, until they're just a pile of unconscious punks littering the back alley.

Bucky can feel the kid staring at him, and knows instantly that he should book it out of there, before he gets a clearer look at his face, but then he hears a loud, high-pitched, "Uhm—h-hey!" and against his better judgement, Bucky turns around, returning the kid's wide-eyed stare.

"I gotta go give this back!"

Bucky looks at him, confused, and then sees the tattered, brown leather wallet the kid has tightly

gripped in his ridiculously-gloved hands. He looks back up at the kid's face, keeping his own expressionless.

"Those guys—" the kid starts, voice quivering. He's afraid. "They beat up this dude and stole his wallet. I-I gotta go give it back, but—could you wait here?"

Bucky wasn't planning on verbally answering the kid, but even if he was, he doesn't get the chance before he's lifting his arm and shooting—*something*—out of his wrist, aimed at the top of the building beside him, and then he's lifting off the ground with a powerful jump.

"I'll be right back!" he shouts, swinging on—whatever that is—and flinging himself onto the roof.

What the fuck.

Of course, Bucky doesn't wait, and the moment the coast is clear, he's vanishing into the darkness of the alleyways and heading home to his apartment.

Him and his fucking character flaws. What difference does it make to him, if one kid gets shot trying to play hero? Saving some tiny idiot with superpowers that he doesn't know how to use is *not* worth the risk of giving away his location to Hydra, or to Steve.

But he'd done it anyway.

He pulls the brim of his cap lower to hide his face, stuffing his gloved hands (one with a hole in the palm now, thanks, kid) into the pockets of his jacket. It's finally starting to get warmer now, not that the cold had even touched him. Still, he's grateful the snow is gone. He didn't want to have to steal a pair of boots, and these sneakers did a lousy job of staying dry over winter.

He notices a "Dog Walker Wanted" flyer stapled to a telephone pole and snags it, pulling out his shitty burner phone. The flyer advertises ten bucks a walk, twice a day, Saturdays and Sundays. An extra hundred and sixty dollars a month would almost land him in the green. Bucky texts the number, trying his best to upsell himself, before sliding the phone back into his pocket and continuing his way home.

It's the shithole part of Queens, but it's the only kind of apartment Bucky can afford with his stolen ID. It's a small studio on the second floor, noisy asshole neighbors above and below him, but it's been almost a year now, and even though it's gross, he's strangely fond of it.

He knows he shouldn't be. He has to be ready, every minute of every day, to leave it behind without a drop of hesitation. He just keeps hoping that he won't have to. Which is stupid, because of course he will—sooner or later, someone will find him. It's only a matter of time.

Hoping otherwise is foolish, but as Bucky has realized today, somewhat painfully, he is deeply flawed.

He climbs the stairs to his balcony, to his battered and decaying front door. The stairs are handy because they're loud and creaky, and he can hear almost anyone climbing them to get to his door. It's the closest thing to security this dump has.

He pulls his key out of his pocket, and almost fucking drops it when a shrill and cheerful voice calls out, "Hey!"

Bucky whips around faster than the eye can see, knife in hand and ready to throw at whoever's behind him, and he barely—seriously, *barely*—manages to stop himself from imbedding the thing into the stupid, pajamas-wearing, shrimp of a walking death wish's forehead.

“Whoa! W-Wait!” the kid hollers, hands up defensively. “It’s just me!”

He lowers the knife, only a little, not wanting to give the kid the wrong impression that getting stabbed in the face is completely off the table.

“Sorry for asking you to wait,” the kid says. Christ, how old is he? He sounds like an eight-year-old girl. “It took me longer than I thought to track that dude down, but he was super grateful! He said to tell you thanks for helping me get it back.”

The kid’s tone is sincere, but it’s almost impossible to take him seriously through the ridiculous, bug-like goggles strapped to his face.

“I wanted to say thanks, too,” the kid continues, nervously, when Bucky doesn’t say anything, “you totally saved my life. I—I wasn’t expecting that guy to have a gun, and—and I would be, y’know, *really* dead right now if you hadn’t helped me, so, y’know—thanks. I seriously owe you.”

Bucky honestly couldn’t be less interested in carrying on this conversation, so instead of responding, he re-pockets his knife and turns back to unlock his door. The kid spies his metal hand glinting through the hole in his glove, and openly gawks at it, obvious even under his stupid get-up.

“It was so cool how you blocked that shot!” he gushes, inching forward a step. “That bullet didn’t even put a dent in your hand! Where did you get that, by the way? If you don’t mind me asking, I mean. It’s so cool! And, like, indestructible! Is it Stark Industries? I didn’t even know they made prosthetics.”

Pointedly leaving this whole conversation one-sided, Bucky opens his door and steps in, turning around, fully intending on shutting the door in the kid’s face.

“Hey,” the kid says, tone disgustingly hopeful. “Could you teach me how to fight like you?”

Bucky stares down at the stupid, ugly goggles, lets his irritation show plainly on his face, and firmly, coldly says, “No.”

And slams the door.

He hates the smell of moldy leaves, soaking wet and half-decomposed when the snow on top finally melts. They cling to everything, to his shoes, to the bottom of the legs of his pants, to the shitty, old rake. He’ll have to leave his shoes outside on his balcony when he gets home so he doesn’t track this gross mess all over his floor.

Still, it’s better than snow. People had stared at him funny when he shoveled driveways in a light jacket and sneakers, but no one’s staring at him now. He’s finally dressed seasonally-appropriate.

He’s glad the season’s changing; walking home in cold, wet shoes every day had been the fucking worst. No wonder people were willing to pay for someone else to shovel snow for them, it sucked. But even still, it’s not like he could go out and get a real job, and rent and food money had to come from somewhere.

Besides, honestly, the menial work isn’t so bad (when his feet stay dry, anyway). The days go by quicker when he’s got his hands full, and the work is mindless, lets him shut down until it’s all done and he can get paid and go home.

He keeps busy. It helps every day go by more smoothly.

Bucky scrunches his nose as the smell of rotten leaves wafts up into his face, bending over to tie the garbage bag, full of them, up. It smells like shit and death, but at least that was the last bag, and he's done now. He carries the bags of leaves to the yard-waste bin, takes the rake back to the shed, and knocks on what's-his-face's door to tell him he's finished.

"Yard looks great. Thanks, Jimmy," says what's-his-face, a friendly, older gentleman. "Here you go." And hands him two twenty-dollar bills.

"Thanks," says Bucky. "Got my number, case you need more work done?"

The man smiles, "I'll call you. You take care now," and shuts the door.

Pocketing the money, Bucky makes his way to the sidewalk, heading home. He's relieved it's not a motel day. The motel's owner gives him close to minimum wage, but it's always the grossest, shittiest maintenance jobs he has, the jobs no one else will do. Sometimes he hates having to take every job he's offered, but then again, he gets to eat almost regularly. He really can't complain.

He needs to land at least three more medium-sized jobs to clear rent this month, so today won't be an eating day. His stomach whines at the thought, but Bucky ignores it, choosing instead to take a long-ass nap when he gets home.

His stomach rumbles angrily, but the idea of resting his tired body lifts his spirits, at least until he climbs the stairs to his door.

He knows how to walk up the steps so that he's utterly silent, but still, somehow, the kid sitting by his door whips his head up when Bucky reaches the balcony. Bucky doesn't know how the hell he heard him or, more importantly, who the hell he is.

"Hi!" the kid says, beaming at him as he stands. The voice is unmistakable. The height—or lack thereof—and scrawniness are unmistakable, too.

Bucky looks the kid over, somewhat surprised that he looks so… normal. Not nearly as insectoid as Bucky had imagined. He's definitely young, though; too young to be inciting thugs to shoot him in the face. The floppy brown curls and baby-face do absolutely nothing for the vigilante gig he's pursuing.

"What do you want?" Bucky says, as unfriendly as he can manage. The kid's face reddens, and he looks away, down at the floor. Nervous.

"Well, I, uhh—" he stutters. Only when he's feeling insecure, apparently. He had no problem running his mouth about Bucky's arm a few nights ago. "Just saying 'thanks' the other night didn't feel like enough, so, I, uhh—" he lifts a white, plastic shopping bag, stuffed almost too full, the sides stretching and threatening to tear. "I thought I could thank you with dinner?"

Bucky stares at the nearly-overflowing grocery bag, then at the kid's face, who looks nervous, but tentatively hopeful, the corners of his mouth barely threatening to quirk upward.

"Kid," Bucky says, less hostile now, "I am way too old for you. Aren't there any other boys in middle school you can crush on?"

The kid's face goes apple-red, all the way to his forehead. "It—it's not like that!" he shouts. "I'm not—and besides, I'm in high school!"

“Good for you,” Bucky drawls, moving past the erupting mountain of embarrassment that used to be a teenage boy to unlock his door. “Doesn’t change the fact that I’m not interested. Now get lost, I got enough going on without having to worry about changing my address to escape from pint-sized stalkers.”

“Okay,” says the kid, and the disappointment practically pours out of him, heavy like a waterfall and just as audible. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to—uhh—make you uncomfortable, or anything. But—” he reaches into the bag and shuffles some things around, pulling out a clear plastic box of cookies. “Will you take these? I really just wanna do something to thank you. I mean, you saved my life.”

Bucky looks at the outstretched hand, holding the box of cookies out to him—at the bulky bag of groceries gripped tightly in the kid’s other fist—and finally at the sad-but-still-slightly-hopeful look on the boy’s face.

He sighs.

“What else you got in there?”

The kid’s face lights up like Coney Island on opening night. Inwardly, Bucky groans.

Fucking flaws.

For someone who practically begged to cook him dinner, the kid is laughably lost standing in the middle of Bucky’s kitchen.

Part of him takes pity on the kid, but a bigger, pettier part of him enjoys the almost dumfounded expression on his face as he stands there, the bag of groceries deposited on the counter, looking around Bucky’s studio apartment like he’s never seen the inside of a building before.

He takes in Bucky’s sparse and threadbare furniture; the tattered loveseat against the wall, the thin and creaky mattress on the floor—Bucky’s backpack, stuffed with all the clothing he has, lying at the head of the bed where he’s been using it as a pillow. His one ratty, fleece blanket pulled tightly over the mattress, a habit he can’t seem to break. The uneven barstool with its splintering wood, pulled up against the island counter, the shade-less floor lamp in the corner that flickers even with a new bulb in it.

The kid’s gaze shifts back down to the bag on the counter as he starts pulling the items out. Vegetables, pasta, chicken breasts, a bottle of unnaturally-blue liquid that says “Gatorade,” whatever the hell that is. The kid spreads everything out on the standalone counter and then stares down at it, unsure of what the next step is.

The pity wins out, and Bucky takes a semi-reluctant step further into the kitchen. “What were you planning on making?”

“Uhh, well,” the boy starts, cheeks darkening a little, “I don’t—I’m not really sure? I kind of just grabbed a bunch of stuff I was hungry for in the store…”

Of course he did. Bucky sighs. “Well, it looks like we’re having pasta with chicken and fried vegetables,” he says, bending down to the cupboard with its missing door, pulling out his one pot and his scratched-to-shit frying pan. “Why don’t you start boiling the pasta, and I’ll fry the chicken?”

He hands the kid the pot, who looks down at it like Bucky just gave him a live grenade. Then he stutters out a high-pitched, “O-Okay,” placing the pot on the stovetop and scooping up the box of noodles to read the directions. He doesn’t look up from the box as he fumbles to turn the element on.

“Kid.”

“Yeah?”

Bucky honestly doesn’t know whether to laugh or groan.

“You have to put water in it first.”

Face red as a lobster, the kid’s mortified expression morphs into sheepishness, laughing embarrassedly as he swipes the pot from the stove. “Oh! Y-Yeah, duh!” he laughs. “I’ve, uhm, I-I’ve never really done this before, so…”

“Really.” Bucky says, voice drenched in sarcasm.

Which still manages to go completely over the kid’s head, somehow.

“Yeah, I, uhh… just never really learned how, I guess,” the kid starts filling the pot, then stops, pulling it away from the tap. “Uhm, how much should I…?”

“About halfway,” says Bucky. “A little more if we’re cooking all of it.”

The kid does so, placing the pot back on the stove and adding the noodles, and then puts the too-large lid on top.

Bucky takes up the other burner, starting on the chicken. “Dice up the vegetables while you wait for that boil,” he says, “there’s a knife in the drawer, but be careful, it’s duller than it should be.”

The kid obediently pulls the knife out and begins lining up the vegetables to be chopped. He doesn’t ask for a cutting board, not that Bucky has one anyway, and besides, it’s not like the countertops aren’t already cut to shit. Bucky leaves him to it, turning back around to focus on the chicken, and a couple of moments go by in silence before it’s ruined with a loud and shrill, “Ouch!”

“I told you to be careful,” Bucky says, without turning around. The kid tries to mutter an apology, but it’s broken up by a whine of pain. Bucky sighs again and turns. “Let me see.”

The kid is clutching his hand up to his face, trying to hide it, but there’s blood dripping copiously through his clenched fingers. Bucky curses under his breath and snatches the boy’s wrist, pulling his hand forward to get a look at the cut. His finger is sliced just above the knuckle, and while it’s not very long, it’s deep enough that Bucky can pull apart the skin, which earns a loud yelp of pain from the kid.

The blood runs faster in a heavy stream. He’ll need stitches. God fucking damn it.

“How the hell did you cut yourself this bad with that shitty knife?” Bucky demands, pulling the kid to the bathroom so he can stifle the flow of blood with a wad of toilet paper. He sits the kid down on the rim of the bathtub and kneels in front of him, holding the paper against the wound in a tight fist.

“Super strength,” the kid mumbles, staring at the white toilet paper as it turns red and wet. “I was

having trouble with the potatoes, so I tried to push harder and the knife slipped."

"Your fingers never should have been in the way of the knife in the first place," Bucky chastises in a stern tone. It's too risky to take this kid to the hospital himself. Too many people, too crowded. He'll have to send him alone, which the kid will probably bitch about.

Well, too bad. He should have thought of that before he *wasn't careful,* like Bucky told him to be.

"I'm sorry," the kid says, voice quivering slightly. He looks down at his lap in shame. "It was my first time, so… I didn't know."

"It should be common sense. How old are you?"

He blushes to the tips of his ears. "Uh, fourteen."

Fourteen. Christ.

Bucky suppresses the urge to groan, and says instead, a little less coldly, "You'll need stitches."

The boy starts, almost knocking their knees together. "What? N-No I won't."

"The cut's too deep to heal on its own, kid. It won't stop bleeding if you don't get it patched up."

"It—uhh, it—" he stutters, "—it already has."

Bucky looks up at him, one eyebrow raised. "What?"

"Here, lemme—" the kid says, wiggling his hand out of Bucky's grasp. He gently peels the wet paper from his finger, holding it up for Bucky to see.

The wound is still deep, but not deep enough that the blood is pouring out of it. Bucky stares, grabbing the boy's hand to inspect it more closely, watching as the wound heals before his very eyes.

It puts his accelerated healing to shame, and Hydra had been pretty adamant about making sure they had the best. Who the hell would turn a fourteen-year-old kid into *this?*

"Who are you?" Bucky says, staring into the boy's large, wide, brown eyes, not bothering to mask the suspicion and mistrust in his voice. The boy stares back at him with an almost overwhelming amount of open honesty.

"Peter," he says, voice soft. "Peter Parker. But, uh, when I go on patrol, I'm Spider-Man."

"Who do you work for?" Bucky tries, hand tightening around Peter's wrist. The boy grimaces, and Bucky eases up, just a smidge.

"Nobody," Peter says, leaning back under the weight and intensity of Bucky's glare. "I—it's just me."

"You were born like this?" Bucky says, dubiously, shaking the wrist in his hand for emphasis.

Peter shakes his head, but doesn't try to pull away. "It was an accident."

"Who *caused* the accident?"

"Uhm, me? I guess?" Peter bites his bottom lip, sheepishly. "I was careless in a lab and I got bit by

a radioactive spider."

"A…" Bucky starts, then stops, dropping the boy's wrist from his hand. He leans back, gaping and unable to help it. Of all the things he expected this runt to say, *that* was not one of them.

Christ. Being a top secret Hydra agent would've been more fucking believable.

"You—" Bucky tries again, then ducks his head, pinching the bridge of his nose with his metal hand, feeling the tickle of a headache beginning to serpentine its way up. "Okay," he says, "well, that explains the name, I guess."

There's a beat of silence, and then Bucky feels the pressure of something moving against his metal hand. He pulls it away from his face, sees the kid running his fingers over the back of his palm, tracing up and down each digit in wonderment and reverence.

"Who are you?" Peter asks, gently.

Bucky doesn't say anything right away, a little taken aback by the sight of this kid mapping out every inch of his hand like it's a work of art. If only he knew what a weapon it really is, the things he'd done with it. He pulls his hand away, and Peter looks back up at his face.

"Bucky," he says.

Peter beams, and it's that same Coney Island smile, overwhelming in its intensity. There's something almost familiar about being looked at like that, but Bucky can't remember where from.

"Nice to meet you, Bucky," Peter laughs, and then his expression falls, eyes darting upward in frantic shock. "Oh, crap! The pasta!" he cries, practically leaping over Bucky to rush to the kitchen.

Bucky listens to the "Ouch, ouch, ouch!" of Peter trying desperately to stop the pot from boiling over with his bare hands, and can't help the disbelieving grin that stretches across his face, head lowering to try and hide his amusement, though Peter isn't even there to see it.

Somehow, they manage to save dinner, and Bucky finds himself feeling pleasantly confused, sitting next to the kid on his shitty mattress, as they pick away at their mismatched plates of food.

Gatorade, it turns out, is pretty damn good. Bucky hummed appreciatively when he took his first sip, and Peter grinned at him in that "I told you you'd like it" sort of way. Bucky had half a mind to flick him for it, the little punk.

The noodles are a little too floppy and the vegetables aren't cut quite small enough to get cooked all the way through, but Bucky doesn't mind, and neither does Peter, who finishes his entire plate so fast that Bucky wonders if he even tasted any of it.

Plates empty and piled next to them, they sit comfortably, sharing the box of cookies and Gatorade, Peter rambling on the entire time.

"So I lifted my hand like Iron Man, right, like I was gonna shoot a blast out of my palm and take him down, but then a blast actually appeared! And then Iron Man was there, in his suit and everything, and he said, 'Nice work, kid' and then took off! It was the best moment of my entire life."

"And this was before you got your powers?"

“Oh yeah,” Peter laughs. “This was at the Stark Expo, years ago. I was pretty little back then.”

Bucky huffs. “Haven’t gained a sense of self-preservation in all those years, huh?”

Peter grins, but his face burns red in embarrassment. “I guess not.”

“At least you have super-healing now,” Bucky says, then adds, almost absentmindedly, “I wonder what he would think if he knew you actually grew up to start fighting crime.”

Peter’s eyes widen until they almost bulge out of his head, a mix of excitement and alarm. “I don’t even know what I would do,” Peter says. “He’s, like, my *idol*. But I guess—I mean, like—it’s not like he’d even recognize me. It was years ago and—and I had that mask on…”

He leans back, a whimsical smile gracing his features. His tone is light, airy, totally wistful. “Aw man, if he did, though? That’d be awesome. That’d be the new best day of my life, easy. No contest.”

The kid straightens up after a minute, resting his elbows on his knees again. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m not doing this so I can, like, meet the Avengers or anything. I mean that’d—that’d be amazing, but—I feel like, with what I can do, I’m obligated to try and help people, you know?”

A somewhat faraway look crosses Peter’s face then, his smile faltering. It lasts for a moment, but then he chuckles, shaking his head avertedly. “Though I guess, it all totally would have been a waste if you hadn’t saved me the other night, huh?”

Bucky hums, agreeing. “Hard to bounce back from a bullet in the head, kid, even with your healing abilities. If you want my advice, next time, don’t freeze up.”

“I guess I just…” Peter says, pausing to reconsider his words, “…got scared.”

“You had a gun pointed in your face. If you *didn’t* get scared, you’d be an even bigger mutant.”

Peter laughs, looking over at Bucky with mock-indignation on his face. “*Thanks,*” he says, sarcastically, though he giggles again.

Bucky shrugs, not letting the smile that’s threatening to appear show.

“It’s getting late,” the kid bends down, grabbing their plates, “I should, uhm, I should go,” he says, taking them over to the sink. Bucky watches him rinse them off, then says, “Don’t bother. You brought dinner, I can clean up.”

“You had to do most of the cooking though,” Peter says, smiling shyly, “but okay. I’d stay and help, but the longer I do, the less time I’ll have to patrol, so…”

“You do that every night?”

Peter nods, fidgeting with the sleeves of his hoodie. “Yeah, well, I mean—crime’s not gonna take a break just because I do, right?”

He has a point, but the irrationally over-concerned part of Bucky pipes up to remind him that Peter is a kid—a *small* kid. Superpowers or no, the deeply flawed part of him protests that Peter has no business trying to fight *anyone,* let alone criminals with guns, who won’t hesitate to shoot a tiny punk in pajamas, even if he is only fourteen.

It’s none of his business. Just like it wasn’t any of his business the other night, or all the other

times a runt with no common sense tried to take on more than they could handle.

But it seems to be a universal truth of those runts, that there's an inherent goodness inside each one of them, and Peter, apparently, is no exception.

This kid isn't the only one who can't sit back and do nothing.

"Hang on a second," Bucky says, stalling Peter at the door as he slips his shoes on. Bucky heads to the bathroom and roots around in the medicine cabinet, finding the half-assed first aid kit he'd thrown together all those months ago.

He comes back out and holds his hand out to Peter. "Here," he says. "Careful, it's sharp."

Peter, curious, holds his palms up, and blinks confusedly when Bucky places the small sewing needle in his hands.

"Uhm?"

"Keep this in your sleeve," Bucky says. "Or in one of your gloves, if you can sew it in so that it won't constantly prick you. Just make sure you can touch your finger to it in a heartbeat."

"How come?" Peter asks, lifting the needle like he's never seen one before.

"This is how you learn not to freeze," says Bucky, taking the needle and holding it up in front of the kid's face. "The next time your mind blanks out like that and you can't move, poke yourself with this. Lightly, but enough that it hurts. The pain will release the flood of adrenaline you need to get yourself moving."

He goes to set it back down, Peter lifting his hand to take it. "You need it to be somewhere on your outfit that you can reflexively pierce yourself with it almost absentmindedly. Think you can do that?"

The question snaps Peter out of his little daze, and he nods, enthusiastically. "Yeah, totally! That's really smart!"

Peter pulls his shabby, old wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans and slides the needle into it.

"Thanks, Bucky," he says, righting himself again. "Uhm, I had a lot of fun. Sorry I bled all over your bathroom and almost flooded your kitchen with pasta water."

"Don't sweat it, kid," Bucky says, surprised with himself when he realizes he means it. "Dinner was good."

"Yeah," Peter agrees.

A moment passes, and then it stretches on. Bucky waits, because it's obvious there's something else the kid wants to say, but when he doesn't, Bucky sighs, putting his metal hand on his hip.

"Spit it out."

"Huh?"

Bucky frowns. "You're still here for a reason, so out with it."

Peter's gaze lowers to the floor, and Bucky's momentarily taken aback by the utterly humiliated look that passes on the boy's face, a cross between petrified and completely ashamed.

“Oh, God,” Bucky groans. “You actually *are* crushing on me, aren’t you?”

“No!” Peter says, almost loud enough to be a scream. His face turns the darkest red Bucky’s seen so far, covering every inch of his exposed skin and creeping down his neck below his hoodie. He looks up at Bucky utterly mortified, then sees the smirk that Bucky can’t wipe from his face, and his embarrassment ebbs away into an unimpressed glare. “Jerk.”

“Hey,” Bucky teases with a shrug, still smirking, “I’m going to assume that’s what you’re blushing about until you tell me otherwise.”

A childish pout settles on Peter’s face, but then he lowers his eyes to the floor again, taking a big, deep breath. “Well… uhm…” He rustles his sleeves again, bites his bottom lip, then finally seems to steel himself. “I don’t wanna be, like, pushy or anything, and—I-I understand if you don’t want to, really, I totally get it, but, uhm… well, I—I was just thinking, y’know, maybe we could do this again?”

Peter looks up, makes the briefest eye contact with him, and then lowers his gaze again.

“I don’t really have anyone I can talk to about this stuff with,” the kid finally confesses. “Nobody knows about it, ‘cept you. And I, uhh—I could bring dinner again sometimes? I know I can’t cook, like, at all, but I can help? Or try, anyway?”

Finally the kid looks up at his face and holds his eyes steady, bracing himself for Bucky’s response. He tries his best to look nonchalant, but fails miserably—Bucky can plainly see the tension around his eyes, in his jaw, the quivering of his lips as he forces his mouth to stay straight.

Bucky wants to sigh. This had been the *last* thing he’d wanted. And sure, with an inconsistent income, money’s tight and food is, more often than not, a luxury, but that doesn’t mean he’s thrilled by the idea of some kid spending his lunch money on buying him dinner.

But he realizes, that’s not what Peter’s asking for, not really. The other night, he’d asked him to teach him how to fight. He’d shown up with a bag of food, unannounced, attempted to cook for him even though he has no business being in a kitchen *ever*, and then stayed long after the food was done, eating cookies on an old lumpy mattress with some guy he doesn’t even know.

Pre-Hydra Bucky Barnes probably spent time with people just for the sake of doing so all the time, but post-Hydra Bucky never has, not once. This little stint is the first time Bucky has ever spent time with someone just for *company.*

It hadn’t been so bad, when he really thinks about it.

“I don’t see why you would want to,” Bucky sighs, “but yeah, kid, we can do it again.”

The smile that breaks over the kid’s face hits him right in the chest, brightening the room.

Yeah, it isn’t so bad.

Chapter End Notes

> Hey guys! Thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of this new story. I'm super excited for this one; it's going to be roughly 100k words of pure, fluffy Dad!Bucky & Son!Peter goodness, spiced with romance and some Iron Man hero

worship.

Much love to you all!

# Home

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys! Before you start reading I'd just like to say—*wow*. I am completely blown away by the support and enthusiasm for this story. I am so incredibly grateful for all the sweet comments, kudos, bookmarks, and even those who simply read the first chapter! Thank you so much! I hope you enjoy this next installment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It turns out, when Peter said he would bring dinner again sometimes, what he actually meant was *every day*.

Bucky isn't mad when Peter knocks on his door the next day. Surprised, maybe, but it's hard to be mad when he opens the door and that little face is beaming up at him, Peter's joyous, high-pitched voice calling out, "Hi!" in a bubbly squeak that startles both of them.

The kid's cheeks go red, and he clears his throat, embarrassed, then tries to rein in his enthusiasm. "Brought dinner," he says, in a slightly lower register.

Bucky glances down at the bag of groceries in the kid's hand, just as heavy and packed as yesterday's had been. Then he spies the strap of a backpack hanging off the kid's left shoulder, and wonders why he didn't just put the groceries in there, before he steps aside, letting him in.

"What is it this time?"

"Well I, uhh, I forgot to ask you what you like yesterday, s-so…" Peter smiles, tentative and shy, "I got hot dogs and fries, and some more Gatorade, and there were these, like, cupcake-type things in the bakery aisle? I don't know exactly, they have this weird French name, but they looked reeeally good, so I got those for dessert."

Peter sets his backpack down by the door, and judging from its size and weight, it's stuffed full—presumably with schoolbooks. Well, that explains why he didn't put the groceries in there, anyway. Bucky watches him place the bag on the counter, before he turns to look up at him. "I probably should ask now, before I forget, but, uhm, what *do* you like?"

Bucky blinks. Honestly, he doesn't know. When he picks up the necessities, he's mostly looking at price tags, mapping out what will get him the most nutrition intake with the longest shelf life under his budget. The only things still left in his cupboard are a jar of peanut butter and a package of rice crackers.

"I'm not picky," he tries, offering a shrug. "I'll eat anything. Can't go wrong with a good sandwich and some fresh fruit, though."

Peter's eyes light up. "Oh man, if you like sandwiches, then I *gotta* take you to Delmar's sometime. He has the best sandwiches in Queens. He toasts them and then they just, like, melt in your mouth and—" he pauses, cutting himself off, and gives Bucky another sheepish look. "Uh, sorry, I'm kind of rambling. Are hot dogs okay?"

“Yeah,” Bucky says, opening the bag to inspect the kid’s purchases. “You lived in Queens your whole life?”

“Manhattan till I was five,” he says, picking up the package of hot dogs to read the instructions on the back, “Queens ever since. What about you?”

“Born in Brooklyn,” Bucky replies, bending down to grab the pot. He doesn’t want to lie to the kid, but telling the truth isn’t exactly an option, so he follows up with, “Lived a lot of places in between.”

“That’s so cool!” Peter gushes, smiling widely as Bucky hands him the pot. He fills it with water and adds the hot dogs before placing it on the burner. “Honestly, I don’t really know if I ever want to live anywhere else. I mean, I love Queens. I guess that’s normal, but I don’t really have an urge to find somewhere else, you know? But I do wanna travel, for sure. I really want to visit Europe someday—oh! And New Zealand! It has these crazy mountain ranges that look like they’d be so much fun to photograph, but honestly, the idea of flying over them kind of makes me nervous.”

Bucky’s not really sure which part of Peter’s excited spiel he should comment on. He takes a moment while he prepares the fries to bake in the oven, and then finally goes with, “You’ve never flown before, I’m guessing.”

Peter laughs like he’s embarrassed, though Bucky can’t fathom why. It’s not like fourteen-year-olds are expected to be world travellers or anything. “That obvious, huh?” he says, lightly stirring the wieners with a fork. Bucky doesn’t get the chance to reply before Peter asks, “Did you always plan on coming back to Brooklyn?”

No, he didn’t. He’s spent most of his life not even remembering that he’s *from* Brooklyn, let alone planning on coming back to it. But he can’t say that, not to this kid, so instead he gives a noncommittal, aloof shrug and says, “Brooklyn’s always been my real home.”

Peter smiles, warmly, like that’d been the answer he wanted to hear. Bucky’s not sure what to make of that. “Yeah, that’s how I feel about Queens, too.”

There’s a beat of awkward silence, neither one of them really knowing what to say. He figures he should engage again, ask the kid something about himself, but the only thing Bucky honestly wants to know is why this kid is here, making dinner in his crappy, cheap apartment. He doesn’t get the chance to ask, though, because as he’s quickly learning, silences don’t really last around this kid.

“Hey, can you speak Spanish?”

“Yes.” He doesn’t bother mentioning the other five languages. It would just raise more questions, and the less questions the kid asks, the less he’ll have to lie to him. “Why?”

“I, uhm, I’m taking Spanish in school,” Peter says, “I’m pretty good at it. I mean—I get decent grades in it, but, I have this oral presentation coming up and, well, I have no one to practice with at home, so—I’m worried I might not do as well on it, and it’s kind of stressful, ‘cause, I—I really need to maintain my GPA—”

“A whiz kid by day and a superhero by night, huh?” Bucky says, cutting him off. He doesn’t miss the happy little gleam in the kid’s eyes at being called a superhero. “I know what you’re gonna ask, kid, and it’s fine. If you’re gonna hang around here anyway, you might as well do something productive and get your homework done.”

“So—” says Peter, timidly but full of hope, “so—it’s okay if—I mean—you’ll—?”

"*Yes,"* says Bucky, desperate to stifle the kid's stammering, "I'll help you practice."

Peter smiles with such earnest gratitude that it almost feels out of place, like Bucky had offered him something much more valuable than to just help with his homework. He looks up at him like Bucky just made his biggest dream come true or something, like Iron Man had personally asked him to join the Avengers and come live with them at the tower. It floors Bucky, because he has no idea why something so small would mean so much to him, but then again, he doesn't really know this kid at all, does he?

Peter mutters a quiet thanks, still smiling to himself as he finishes boiling the hot dogs. Bucky watches, observing him, trying to figure him out. There's so much about this kid that he just doesn't understand.

Sure, the kid is almost glaringly small for his age, but he isn't hideously disfigured or anything. He's got the plain, boy-next-door look to him; unassuming and approachable, an average appearance that's pretty much swallowed up by the sheer wholesomeness that he radiates.

He's got some brains, if he's getting decent grades, but is probably smarter—or at least more hardworking—than he's letting on, if he's spending so much time worried about his GPA. He may not be showing off his super strength every chance he gets, but he's still in good shape, with a lean-but-firm build that he can't quite hide beneath his clothes.

His shoes and backpack are new, so he's likely got a family providing for him, and mix that with the friendly demeanor, the smarts, the athleticism, the blinding wholesomeness and that downright endearing, childish head of messy-but-manageable curls that he somehow hasn't outgrown yet, and Bucky is totally lost, staring at this kid with such honest confusion that he's grateful Peter hasn't turned around and noticed it.

Because it doesn't make sense. Yes, the kid is short. Yes, he's awkward, and shy, and has a secret double-life that he can't tell anyone else about, but none of that explains why, of all places, he'd want to be spending his evenings in this shithole of an apartment, cooking his own dinner if he's got parents who would do it for him at home, asking a complete stranger to help him with his Spanish when he's probably got friends at school he could study with—who he could be spending time with, if he's so damn lonely.

He frowns. Beneath his sweater, Bucky feels a familiar, uncomfortable twinge of pain spread through his pectoral muscle near the metal plates of his implant, like it has been all winter. He flexes his metal fingers, trying to ease the ache that crawls up his neck, and focuses his gaze back on Peter, obliviously draining the water from the pot, careful not to let the boiling water touch his hands. Bucky looks down at his left hand, stares at the metal shining through the hole in his glove. He still hasn't taken it off from this morning.

It doesn't make sense. There's nothing wrong with this kid. He could be anywhere with anyone right now, so why, of all places and people, is he *here* with *him?*

He almost asks, but then Peter turns around, grinning, handing him a plate topped with food, his face brimming with pride, and Bucky can't bring himself to. He'll find out another time, he decides. In this moment—Peter smiling up at him, looking like there's nowhere else he'd rather be—the reason doesn't matter. It can wait.

It's already a shitty morning when Bucky is rudely awoken by the quiet, incessant buzzing of his phone across the room. He drowsily rolls off his mattress to retrieve it and is immediately

assaulted by the biting chill of his apartment. Beneath the newspapers taped over the windows, Bucky can see that the glass is so chilled it's begun to ice over.

He grumpily grabs his phone and answers the call. "Hello?"

"Hi, Jim," says a man on the other line. "It's Robert Mitchell calling. Hope I didn't wake you?"

From the sound of his voice, it's pretty obvious that he had, but Bucky lies anyway. "No, it's fine. Need work done?"

The old man chuckles, in a jovial, grandfatherly way. "Straight to the point, huh? You mentioned last time you were here that you have some mechanic experience. Well, my car wouldn't start this morning. Think you could take a look?"

"Yeah," Bucky says, flipping open his notebook and grabbing a pen. Clearly he's done work for this guy before, but he won't remember who he is until he sees his face. "What's the address?"

The man cracks a lame joke about old age and memory loss before he tells him. Bucky promptly says that he's on his way before hanging up.

It's while he's getting dressed that he notices something's wrong. His left arm is moving slower, heavier than it usually does. It only did this twice all winter, when the temperature dropped into the 20's. It's cold today, but not that cold. Bucky frowns, rotating his shoulder, trying to see if he can pinpoint a kink in the mechanism, but nothing glaring stands out; the whole thing is just a bit slow to respond.

It's going to be a pain in the ass trying to do engine work with his arm acting up. Bucky's frown deepens, his mood souring further.

It worsens even more when he opens the door and sees that the sky is abnormally dark and full of dreary rainclouds. He'll either have to spend money he doesn't have on busing or taking the train there, or get rained on and have to work all day in wet clothes in this frigid temperature. Bucky glowers, sending the sky a spiteful glare, and turns to lock his door.

He grabs the doorknob with his left hand and tries to squeeze gently, but his entire arm seizes up, locking his fist around the handle in a crushing grip. "Fuck!" Bucky curses, grabbing his wrist and manually applying pressure on his palm, releasing his fingers. He pulls his arm away like it's deadweight, and the knob cracks and falls right off the door, hitting the balcony with a heavy, metallic thump.

God fucking damn it.

Taking a deep breath, Bucky closes his eyes and represses the urge to just say *fuck this* and go back to bed. He can't turn down this job; he needs the money. With Peter bringing him dinner every day, he actually has enough saved up for rent this month, but now he'll have to take this job just to afford a new goddamn door handle.

He lets his head slump forward until his forehead rests on the door, eyes shut, taking several big, deep breaths. It's just a shitty morning, he reminds himself. He still has to face the day. He can fix the doorknob, his clothes will dry. He'll just have to be more careful about using his left arm from now on, that's all. He can't afford to go back to bed.

Things will suck for a few hours, and then he'll be home, cash in hand, dry and warm in his apartment, most likely with a cheerful kid talking his ear off and a hot meal in his stomach.

Bucky tries not to get his hopes up, but that encouraging thought gives him the little push he needs to toss the broken handle inside before determinedly trekking to work in the rain.

The job doesn't go *bad,* per se, but the cold and dampness wreak havoc on his already-malfunctioning limb, and though fixing the car should've only taken him two hours max, it bleeds on to nearly four before he finally gets the engine started. He's forced to cut a deal with the old man because of it, but at least the guy says he'll be sure to call Bucky again the next time he needs work done.

The rain is still falling by the time he leaves to head home, but it's light and cold, closer to sleet than rain, and thankfully not quite as heavy and solid as snow. It isn't falling hard, but the freezing moisture sticks to Bucky's hair and clothes and makes the muscles around the metal plate in his shoulder ache painfully.

He's almost all the way home by the time he remembers the fucking door handle.

Bucky grunts, frustrated, wet, and more than ready for this whole day to be over. He turns on his heel to head to the nearest hardware store, ruefully thumbing across the bills in his pocket. He'll have to take the subway to get there, there's no way around it.

He doesn't have much time. It's already the afternoon, and Peter will—probably—be showing up soon for dinner. He'd rather get the handle replaced and get showered and changed before he does, because the last thing he wants to do while he's soaking wet and miserable is entertain a hyper teenager.

But because the universe has decided it hates him today, the train he gets on is held up for almost an hour when the one in front of it breaks down, and by the time he gets to the store, buys the right kind of handle, rides the train home and walks back to his apartment, the sun has set and the temperature has dropped at least another five degrees.

It's cold, dark, and rainy, and Bucky is convinced that if Peter did come by today, he left when he realized Bucky wasn't home. There's no way he would hang around on a shit day like today, with no way of knowing if or when Bucky would be back. Bucky sure as hell wouldn't.

But it's odd, though, how the thought of that is the thing that gets him down the most, out of all the shitty things that have happened today. Despite his best efforts not to, he *had* gotten his hopes up that Peter would come by—but why is that?

Bucky tells himself it's because of the free food (even if he does have to teach the kid the most basic, essential rules of a kitchen, like keeping your fingers out of the knife's way or how to boil water). There's no reason for it to be anything else. He doesn't even *know* Peter, and Peter sure as hell doesn't know a thing about *him*. He wouldn't come around if he did. Especially not unarmed.

But he knows, really, deep down in his flawed soul, that the real reason he's so disappointed is because… well, he wanted to see the kid.

And that's a dangerous thing, *want. Want* has been the thing he's avoided the most in the last year—almost as much as Steve. *Want* is unfamiliar. It's an almost unrecognizable thing to feel. He's been conditioned—and is still conditioning himself—to only respond to *need,* to *necessity.* Eat, sleep, earn money for food and shelter. Those things have been the closest he's ever come to *want,* until now. Until Peter Parker showed up, and then refused to *stop* showing up.

He knows it's foolish. It's a stupid, irresponsible risk to take. But he can't help himself. It's only been a few days, but he's become used to Peter's presence; to his rambling and his bubbliness and

the high-pitched sound of his voice. He's become used to being asked a thousand annoying questions so quickly that he only registers half of them. He's become used to teaching him Spanish, or even just watching him determinedly work his way through his other homework. He's become used to the absolutely alien phenomena of someone being *happy* to see him.

And that's dangerous. Bucky isn't used to *wanting* anything; least of all social interaction, and yet here he is, truly and honestly *sad* that when he climbs these stairs to his broken front door, Peter isn't going to be there waiting for him.

He's never felt more pathetic as he begins to walk up the steps.

Or more relieved when he reaches the top, and sees Peter sitting there, waiting, just like he hoped he would be.

Bucky almost smiles, but the relief quickly turns to worry when he sees how wet—and *trembling*—the kid is, huddled against the door like a cold, neglected dog. His hoodie and jeans are soaked through, and his backpack and the bag of groceries are dripping all over the balcony floor.

"Hi," Peter says, smiling at him, but Bucky can hear the chattering of his teeth, and hardly notices the smile in the wake of how red the kid's nose and ears are.

"How long have you been here?" Bucky asks, walking over and crouching down in front of the kid, getting a good look to check for any early signs of frostbite. He notices when Peter presses his mouth closed, jaw tightening, to try and stop his teeth from clacking together.

"Not long," Peter smiles again. His lips are far too pale. "What happened to your door?"

"It broke this morning," Bucky says, pulling both of them up off the ground. "And don't lie to me, kid. You're freezing."

At least the kid isn't too cold to blush. "Sorry," he mumbles. "I actually, uhm—got here a little earlier than I usually do, so…"

Of course he did. Because today is just an absolute shit day.

Bucky sighs. "I'm sorry you had to wait," he says. "I had to get a new handle. Let's go inside and get you warmed up."

"I have the—" Peter stutters, cut off by his teeth chattering, "—the perfect thing," he says, shuddering as they enter the apartment, which isn't that much warmer. Bucky takes the kid's backpack and grocery bag from him and sets them in the kitchen, before heading to the bathroom to retrieve his towel.

"Oh?" he asks, handing the towel to Peter, and then grabbing some dry clothes for himself from his own bag. "And what's that?"

"Hot chocolate," Peter says, smiling, gratefully running the towel through his damp hair. "It seemed like a hot chocolate kind of day."

Hot chocolate sounds familiar, but Bucky can't remember what it tastes like, or if he's ever even had it. "Sounds good, kid. Do you wanna make that while I put in this new doorknob?"

Peter's brows lift, somewhat surprised. "I'm allowed in the kitchen by myself?"

Bucky can't help the little smirk that crosses his face. "I think you're finally ready to boil water

unsupervised."

Peter smiles back, but then his expression falters, just a little. Probably wouldn't have been noticeable at all, to anyone other than Bucky. "Actually, I…" he says, timidly, "…I could help you? I mean—it'll go faster if I help, right? And then we can make dinner together, afterwards?"

Bucky blinks, not really sure of what to say. This kid is soaking wet and frozen to the bone, and still, he'd rather stand in an open doorway, freezing his already-frozen ass off, when he could be sitting in a warmer kitchen, sipping hot chocolate? Just to spend a couple of extra minutes with him?

He wants to put his foot down, wants to demand that Peter go boil some damn water before he has to start lobbing his frostbitten fingers off, but—

*Damn* those eyes are hard to turn down.

He sighs. "Okay, kid, have it your way," he says, grabbing the shopping bag with the new handle inside, "but I don't want to hear any whining about how cold you are, got it?"

"Got it," Peter says, smiling his real smile, the usual one that Bucky recognizes, all warm and bright and happy.

Bucky changes into some dry clothes, and they set to work unscrewing what's left of the old handle, and then crouch on either side of the door to fit the new one in. Bucky lets Peter take the inner side (even though it's only slightly warmer) but that means he has to be the one to screw the two sides of the doorknob together while Bucky holds them. Bucky is a little surprised, and more than a little pleased, to see that Peter is much more proficient with tools than he is with cooking utensils.

"So uhh, you, uhm," Peter says whilst steadily turning the screwdriver, "you ripped the doorknob off?"

"Yeah," says Bucky, surprised. "How'd you know that?"

Without peeking around the door, Peter lifts the busted-off handle with his free hand, showing the very obvious finger indentations in the metal knob. Bucky has no idea when the hell he picked that up.

Before he can ask, Peter surprises him even further. "Is, uhh—is your arm okay?"

"My arm?"

"Yeah, y'know, this…" Peter sets the doorknob down, focusing instead on finishing putting the new one in. "The handprints on it are from a left hand, so… I just thought if, maybe, your hand locked up or something."

"How the hell," Bucky says, audibly disturbed, "did someone as smart as you not have the common sense to keep your fingers out of the way when you're using a knife?"

Peter laughs, an embarrassed, pseudo-offended sound. "I never cooked before!"

"But you do detective work all the time?"

"Yeah, every night! When I'm out protecting the streets from dangerous criminals!" Peter laughs again, and it's such a bubbly, contagious sound, Bucky has to duck his head and shake it slowly

from side to side to resist the temptation to laugh along with him.

If Bucky can't keep the smile off his face while they finish installing the new handle, well, Peter can't see it through the door, anyway.

They're halfway through cooking dinner when the cold and dampness catch up with him. There's no warning when Bucky's hand involuntarily clenches around the handle of the frying pan he's holding, snapping it clean off.

Peter looks up at it, surprised, but not wary like Bucky expected him to be—if anything, Peter looks… enthused. His eyes are bright and shining the way he imagined they were the first night they met, when Bucky blocked that bullet for him.

"Hey uhm, if you want, I could—" he doesn't even look up from Bucky's hand as he starts talking, "I could take a look at it for you? I'm—I'm pretty good with tech. Not, like, amazing or anything, but, uhh—I get pretty decent grades in Robotics Lab? And I'm pretty good at figuring things out—I built my web-shooters myself and everything."

Bucky stills, keeping his gaze down at the stovetop and not on Peter. The thought of him getting a close look at his arm is… distressing. For one thing, he *needs* his arm—if it got screwed up in anyway, Bucky's safety would be entirely compromised. His arm is his self-defense.

But it's not just that. This arm is a dead giveaway to his identity. Even he knows there aren't any prosthetics out there like his. It's completely of its own caliber. The more of it Peter sees, the quicker he'll be able to figure out who he is—and what he's done.

And that's the other side of it. This arm… Bucky has *done things* with this arm. Things that, even if he could fully remember all the details, he wouldn't want to. He sure as hell doesn't want Peter knowing about any of it. This arm is a weapon. It was Hydra's weapon. That's something he has to keep Peter as far away from as possible.

If Bucky ever manages to do something right, keeping Peter away from even breathing the same air as Hydra will be it.

"Don't worry about it, kid," he says, chucking the broken handle in the trash. "It just doesn't like the cold."

The kid sags, visibly disappointed, but Bucky holds his ground.

It's for his own good.

It's a few days later, when the cold snap has thankfully ended and the sun has been shining consecutively, when Bucky is once again awoken by his cellphone buzzing at an ungodly hour of the morning.

Despite the warm light trickling in through his papered-up windows, Bucky can't quite stifle the grumpy, sleepy tone of his voice when he answers. "Hello?"

"This Jim Barnes?" says a rough, deep-voiced man on the other end.

"Speaking."

"Name's Frank Descartes," the guy says, gruff and gravelly. "I'm an associate of Robert Mitchell."

That name is familiar. A guy he's worked for. The car guy? "You need work done?"

"Manner of speaking," he says. "I'm Robert's usual car guy. He says you fixed that busted alternator for him earlier this week? Well, he wanted to get a second opinion, you know, since you don't have a mechanic's license and all. Wanted to make sure it was safe."

"What, he want his money back?"

The guy laughs, a deep, rumbling chuckle. "On the contrary, son," his tone lifts. He sounds downright impressed. "You did some damn fine work. I'd like to offer you a job."

Bucky blinks, not quite comprehending what he just heard. "You're a mechanic, what do you need me for?"

"Not a mechanic, son. I'm a salesman. And I know a thing or two about cars. I help fix up my friends' rides when they break down, but I charge 'em about twice as much as you do. I get cars used and cheap off the insurance lot. A 2010 Corolla for two-hundred bucks at the auction. If you can fix an alternator like that, without havin' to pay for new parts? Son, together we could buy and fix up these salvaged cars and make a killing."

Bucky's mouth opens, but no words come out. He isn't sure what to say. A job would be amazing —life-changing, even, to have a steady income like that. But it's a huge, volatile risk.

"What do you say? I buy 'em, you fix 'em, I'll sell 'em and split the profit. That sound fair?"

Before Bucky can say anything one way or the other, the man adds, "Oh and, don't fret, Robert told me about your situation. I admit I have some old-fashioned respect for veterans. I'll pay you cash, and we can do weekly payments until you get your affairs in order. I admire a man who doesn't stay down when he's kicked, but more importantly, you know your way around an engine, and that's what I need. So I'm offering you regular hours and a living wage, if you're interested."

Christ. Bucky lets himself drop down on his tattered loveseat, feeling overwhelmed. The offer is too good to be true—literally. He's not even sure what the living wage *is* these days, but he knows it'd be enough to make rent, and more than that. Food. Furniture. *Savings.* He could actually build a nest egg. He could put enough away to start over and live decently if he's ever found.

But it's a risk. And there's a reason he hasn't searched for a steady job with regular hours. Doing maintenance work at the motel and walking dogs on the weekends don't count; that's only a couple days a week, if that, with unpredictable hours that are always on-call. There's hardly any routine there—it's harder to trace. People looking for patterns or schedules would have a hard time pinning him down with that.

This, on the other hand, a steady job with a living wage and regular hours—that's practically advertisement to someone who's looking for patterns. A routine means they'll know where he'll be and when. It's asking to be ambushed. It's asking to be *found.*

But damn, the idea of not having to struggle to make ends meet is hard to turn down.

"Can I, uhh," he starts, then pauses, licking his lips. "Listen, this is an amazing offer, I'm kind of in over my head here. Could I—" God damn, he's been spending too much time with that kid, even his fucking stutter is wearing off on him. "Is it all right if I think about it? Just for a couple days. It'd be a huge change for me."

"Sure," the man (Frank?) says, but Bucky can hear the slightly affronted, incredulous note in his voice, "no problem. I'll give you my shop number, and you give me a call when you've decided,

yeah?"

"Yeah," Bucky says, reaching for his pen and notebook. "Great. Uhh, thanks."

He scrawls the number down, his hand shaking slightly, before thanking the man again and saying goodbye. His arm feels kind of numb after he hangs up, and he lets himself flop, feeling drained and scatterbrained, against the armrest.

He knows he should call back and turn it down. But the thought of being able to buy dinner for Peter for a change keeps him from picking up the phone.

By the time Friday rolls around, Bucky still hasn't talked himself into turning down Frank's offer.

He starts to a couple of times, but then Peter comes by in the afternoons, and all Bucky can think about while they're eating and Peter is rambling on is how different this could be if he took the job. What would it be like, eating dinner with Peter from across an actual dining table? Cooking with decent, new utensils instead of a single fork and a handle-less frying pan? Drinking out of actual *cups,* instead of sharing a bottle of Gatorade?

He hates thinking about it, because none of those things are at all *necessary,* and he's pretty sure he'd never feel justified spending actual hard-earned money on them. Not when he should be saving that money for an inevitable escape.

But still, the thought nags.

Because really, if he doesn't, what's the point? If his entire life is just going to be about running from Hydra, he might as well end it, for all the difference it would make. If he's going to stay alive, in this world, he should be a part of it—he should *live.* He has this home. It's shitty, but it's his. There's nothing wrong with wondering what it could be like if he actually treated it that way.

Well. The fantasy is nice, anyway.

With the warmth and sunshine holding up, Bucky's in fairly good spirits come Friday afternoon. There were no jobs today, so he spent the day cleaning the place up, taking his clothes and bedding down to the Laundry Land for a wash, and then trying to tune up his arm, though he still couldn't figure out what its issue is.

When the late afternoon hits, Bucky is more than ready for Peter to show up. Jobless days like this one can be pretty agitating, so spending the evening with the kid will be an entirely welcomed distraction. Against his better judgement, Bucky's come to expect that Peter will come, the way he has been every single day, even in shitty weather.

But 3:30 turns to 4:00 turns to 4:30, and there's still no sign of the kid. That's not*entirely* unusual—Bucky suspects that the kid occasionally stays late after school, probably doing extracurricular stuff. He's a high school freshman, after all. Maybe Fridays are club days.

When 5:00 P.M. hits, Bucky feels a twinge of something unpleasant, low in his stomach. Peter hasn't been later than 5:30 once since he started coming. And he had said *see you tomorrow* last night, as he left. So why isn't he here yet?

Sighing, Bucky glances around his immaculate shithole of an apartment and decides he can't spend another stale second in it. He walks out onto the balcony, shoes and hat on, cellphone and keys in hand, before he starts feeling incredibly silly about this whole thing.

Peter's a kid. A teenager. A *likeable* teenager. There's no reason to think he wouldn't have other things going on on a sunny Friday afternoon. Maybe something came up; maybe his friends from school invited him out. It's not like Peter could let him know if his plans changed—they'd never exchanged phone numbers.

Bucky tries to tell himself that it isn't a big deal, but a dark, insidious fear looms over his head. What if Peter ran into trouble on the way here? Alone on a Friday evening in New York City? What if he tried to interrupt a mugging or a bank heist or a burglary? He knows Peter isn't *weak,* but if the night they met proves anything, it's that the kid has a lot to learn about picking fights.

What if he picked a fight with someone he couldn't beat?

Someone with a gun—

—while Bucky is standing here, nowhere nearby to block the shot?

Silliness forgotten, Bucky clambers down the stairs two steps at a time, heading for the street before he can talk himself out of it.

He'll just walk around for a while, that's all. Just to get the agitation out. If he happens to run in to Peter on the way then, hey, lucky accident. And if he doesn't, and Peter's waiting for him at home when he finishes his walk, he can just say he was at work. And if Peter isn't waiting—

He clenches his jaw.

As he reaches the main road, all Bucky can think is, *I should have said yes when he asked me to teach him how to fight. Just for the God damn peace of mind.* His pace is brisk and steadfast as he makes his way down the sidewalk. *When I see him, I'll tell him I've changed my mind. It's not too late.*

Anxiety swirls in the pit of his stomach like an ugly, black hurricane. Bucky starts walking faster, until he's almost jogging, like he can outrun the terrible feeling inside him. His mind is a back-and-forth tug-of-war between *you're being ridiculous, he's fine, he'll be waiting for you when you get home,* and *please, God, don't let it be too late.*

Bucky's about to start shouting Peter's name, just to drown the thoughts out, when he turns the corner and sees—well, at first, he doesn't know what.

The fence beside the sidewalk is eight feet tall and solid wood; a stockade style fence, no doubt built to give the owners the maximum amount of privacy possible in this part of Queens. Bucky's hyperactive, anxious train of thought is derailed when he turns the corner and sees a kid *hanging* from the fence, their upper body dangling on the other side, the posts tucked beneath their arms, toes planted firmly on the side to hold them up. Bucky can't see their face or shoulders on the other side, but he knows who it is instantly. He knows the backpack, the shoes.

The relief almost knocks him on his ass.

"Kid," he says, coming to stand right next to where Peter is hanging. "What are you *doing?"*

Peter jolts, lifting his head and peering down at Bucky from the top of the fence. "Bucky!" he says, obviously surprised, before a glowing smile spreads across his face. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Bucky says, giving Peter a pointed look. "You spying on the neighbors?"

Peter's face goes beet red. "No!" He glares, half-heartedly, and then smiles again, a little more sheepish. "I'm just saying hi to my buddy. I always do on my way over."

"Your buddy?"

"Yeah," Peter says, lifting one of his hands to reveal the long, dirty, torn-to-shit dog rope he's holding. "He brings me his toy when I walk by, so I stop and play with him for a bit before I come over."

On any other day, Bucky's pretty sure he would find this endearing, maybe even cute, but for the moment all he feels is a massive amount of relief, and a small inkling of irritation.

Peter turns back to the dog and says his goodbyes, before hopping down to the street, smiling up at Bucky obliviously.

Bucky wonders if it's a bad sign that his irritation immediately vanishes.

"Sorry I'm kinda later than I usually am. I had tutoring today after school," Peter says, adjusting the straps of his backpack. It's then that Bucky notices the absence of a grocery bag.

"It's fine," he says. "Do you usually hit the grocery store over on 8th?"

The kid smiles, a little nervous and bashful. "Yeah, but, uhm," he stutters shyly, "I was actually thinking—if you want to—we could eat out today? At Delmar's? I've been craving it ever since we talked about it a while back and—and I think you'll really like it! I mean, don't get me wrong, cooking together has been really fun but, you said you like sandwiches? So we could—if you want to?"

The hopefulness in Peter's smile is infectious, and Bucky finds himself sighing, still coming down from the anxiety-ridden rollercoaster he was riding earlier. Peter probably could have asked him for anything at that moment and he wouldn't be able to say no.

"Sure, kid," Bucky says. "Whatever you want."

The moment Delmar's Deli-Grocery comes into view, Bucky can instantly see why Peter likes it. Delicious sandwiches or no, the place practically radiates that New York charm that makes this city so iconic. There's something so incredibly wholesome and familial about it, even from the outside, that has Peter's eyes shining the way they do whenever he's feeling all bubbly and excited. Which, from the moment Bucky met him, has so far been exactly 100% of the time.

The door chimes when they open it, and a friendly-looking older gentleman grins when he sees them. "Mr. Parker!"

"Hey, Mr. Delmar!" Peter says, practically bounding up to the counter. "How've you been?"

"Been good, kid, where you been, huh? I used to see you every day, now not for, what, three weeks?"

Peter laughs, in that shy, embarrassed way of his. "Sorry, Mr. Delmar. Just been busy."

"Uh huh," Mr. Delmar says, obviously not buying it. He looks over at Bucky, eyes him for a moment, then asks, "So what can I get you fellas?"

“I’ll have a number five, please. With pickles,” Peter says, before glancing up at Bucky.

“Make that two,” Bucky says, hand shooting out to stop Peter from reaching for his wallet. “Kid, no. I’ll get it.”

“Oh, uhh,” says Peter, taken aback. “Are you sure? I don’t mind…”

“*Yes,”* Bucky insists, lightly flicking him on the temple, making Peter give a surprised laugh. “Make yourself useful and go find us a table. I’ll bring the grub.”

“Okay, okay!” Peter says, laughing, shielding his head from more flick attacks with his arms. “I’m going!”

Bucky can’t help the smile that crosses his face as he watches Peter head for the other side of the deli, sliding the cash over the counter.

“You must be the new foster dad,” Mr. Delmar says to him, snapping Bucky’s attention back. “I’m glad to see this. I haven’t seen Mr. Parker laugh or smile like that in—months. Not since the summer. I’m glad he has you who will bring him here, and not just for the business,” the man smiles, but there’s an edge to it; a tenseness in his face that Bucky can’t quite discern. “The other ones have all been no good.”

Bucky has to actually, *physically* suppress the urge to gape. “You haven’t seen *that* kid smile or laugh since the summer?”

“I know. He’s always been so cheerful, but grief will do that. Grief and bad homes. But I can tell, the way he smiles at you, you have given him a good home. I am grateful for that—he needs it more than anyone.”

Bucky doesn’t even know where to begin correcting the man, but he doesn’t get the chance as a tray of sandwiches is handed to him, just as Peter sidles back up beside him. Delmar walks away before he can say anything, so Bucky composes himself and says to Peter, “You find a table?”

“Better,” Peter says. Bucky looks down and sees a fluffy, brown and white cat nestled in his arms. “I found Murph.”

“Well that’s great,” Bucky says, giving Peter a *look,* “but we can’t sit and eat on Murph, so why don’t you try again?”

Peter laughs, loud and joyous, and Bucky follows him through the store, feeling Mr. Delmar’s pleased gaze on his back the entire time.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Bucky. Guy has no idea what he's gotten himself into just yet... but he will!
Thank you for reading, everybody. I sincerely hope you liked it. <3

# I've Got You

Chapter Notes

> **Warning for this chapter:** mentions of murder, domestic abuse, homelessness and generally angsty things. Please read with caution if you're sensitive to these subjects.
>
> Also, on a happier note, you guys are absolutely incredible, and I am so flattered and simultaneously humbled by your praise and enthusiasm for this fic. Thank you so much for all the comments, kudos, bookmarks, tumblr follows—I love you guys very much, and I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Bucky's pleasant surprise, Peter is absolutely right about Delmar's sandwiches being fucking delicious.

Like always, the kid inhales his so fast that Bucky barely has time to even register it, and when he eagerly tries to go back for seconds, Bucky vetoes it, making him grab a bag of fruit instead. Bucky doesn't miss the way Delmar smiles at him when he tells Peter to go pick out something healthier than another sandwich.

The kid insists that Bucky chooses the fruit, so they can share the bag on the way home, and they end up passing plums to each other as they walk, finishing off the bag before they're even halfway there.

Peter rambles the entire time, but Bucky is only half paying attention.

It feels like he's back at square one with the kid; like he knows even less about Peter now than he did earlier today. Delmar had successfully rewritten everything he thought he knew about this boy.

A few hours ago, he thought Peter was a cheerful, well-adjusted, overly friendly kid who probably had ulterior motives. Now he has no idea what to think. To learn that there had *ever* been a time when Peter wasn't smiling joyfully the way he is now has floored Bucky. And to find out that he doesn't live with his parents—which means he's probably getting his money from somewhere *else*—and that he's had multiple "bad" homes, as Delmar had called them—well, all of that has made Peter feel like even more of a stranger than he already is.

He supposes some of it makes sense. If Peter has no family, it's not completely surprising that he'd want to spend his time with a grown-up; someone who has already gone out of their way to protect him. Maybe that part isn't so crazy, but the rest of it? The money for all the groceries they've been eating, not to mention Peter's new backpack and shoes? The way the kid never stops smiling around him? How he can't even leave his side for five fucking minutes to find a table, or to make hot chocolate by himself while Bucky fixes a busted doorknob, as if he doesn't want to spend even a minute alone, if he doesn't have to?

None of that makes any sense to Bucky.

He knows he should ask. Even more than that, he has the right to know. Peter's the one who showed up one day and inserted himself into Bucky's life. He has the right to at least know *why*.

They take a more scenic route home, walking through a small, grassy park rather than around it. Peter stops to pet every single dog he sees, and one cat, who's peacefully sleeping on a bench, until Peter trots over and wakes it up to snuggle it. The cat gives him a long-suffering, annoyed glare, but puts up with the nuzzling and the pets, and Bucky feels a weird sense of affinity for its grumpy expression.

"Kid," he says to get Peter's attention, still kneeling by the bench and rubbing the cat's head, his back to Bucky. "Where are you getting the money for all the food you've been buying?"

Peter's hand stills, just for a split-second, almost unnoticeable—but not to Bucky.

"Uh," the kid starts, obviously taken aback by the question. He glances back at Bucky quickly, makes the briefest of eye contact, then returns his gaze to the cat. "I have a job, sort of."

Bucky waits, expecting the kid to say something else, but he doesn't. He just sits there, continuously petting the cat, though slower now, as if lost in thought.

"Which is?"

"Oh, uh," Peter startles, glancing at Bucky again. "I tutor some of my classmates."

"Wait," Bucky says, frowning confusedly, "that's it? You can't be making that much just by tutoring some kids."

Peter stands up, dusting off his pants, and smiles at Bucky, somewhat embarrassed. His cheeks go a little pink as he says, "It pays pretty good, actually."

They start walking again, at a leisurely pace, and Peter keeps his gaze downturned—doesn't even look up or react when they pass another dog, which makes Bucky's stomach knot, for some reason.

"I go to kind of a rich school," Peter says, like he's admitting something he's ashamed of. "It's supposed to be a technical high school for gifted kids, but it's become kind of prestigious. Lots of rich parents want to be able to say their kids go there, so there's tons of paid admissions. While there's still kids like me, who got in by passing the exam, there are a lot more who didn't, and kind of struggle with the schoolwork."

If possible, the kid's face reddens even more, the tips of his ears darkening beneath his curls.

"I'm kind of, well—I'm, uhh, I'm top of my class, in pretty much every course, so—anyway, the administration helped me set it up, for students who need extra help. I guess there are some parents who're, I don't know, impressed or something—by my GPA, I mean. So, I tutor some kids one-on-one, before school every day and sometimes after, like today. Their parents pay for it, and since they're all pretty wealthy people, they pay really well."

He can tell by the slight change in the kid's voice that he's reluctant to admit it, like he thinks Bucky is going to admonish or bully him for being smart or something. His shoulders hunch like he's expecting to be criticized, and Bucky can't fathom why.

"You should be proud," he tells him, resisting the temptation to pat his shoulder. "There's nothing embarrassing about being smart or working hard, kid. You deserve every cent."

That, at least, is something Bucky can't say for himself.

"Yeah, I guess," Peter says quietly, with a small, subdued smile. "It's just, I don't know, some kids at school make a big deal out of it, you know? I kind of have a reputation now, and… I guess I just

don’t like to stand out, is the thing.”

“Says the kid who runs around every night in bright red pajamas.”

“Hey!” Peter laughs, his usual expression finally back. “That’s different! How is Spider-Man supposed to scare criminals into not committing crimes if he doesn’t stand out?”

“Is that your goal?” Bucky asks. “To purge Queens of criminals by scaring them all into becoming law-abiding citizens?”

“Nah, that’d never work,” Peter says. At least he’s smart enough to admit it. “There’s always gonna be crime. There’s a lot we can do to minimize it, but at the end of the day, there’s always gonna be people who want to cause trouble and hurt others. So that’s why…” he trails off, looking embarrassed again, “…that’s why, there should always be someone like the Avengers, to defend against those types of people. I can help do that, so… I am. That’s really all it is.”

Something like anxiety mixed with dread constricts Bucky’s chest. It’s a familiar feeling—worry, fear, but also a deep, burning pride and admiration—it reminds Bucky of earlier, running down the street thinking Peter got shot, but it feels even more real than that did. Peter isn’t going to stop. He’s going to go out every night and risk death to protect other people—not because he can, but because they *can’t.*

Why does he know this feeling so painfully well?

“If you’re going to keep fighting,” he says, pausing until Peter looks up at him, quizzically. “You should at least know *how* to fight.”

Peter’s eyes widen, a surprised, unbearably hopeful look on his face. He’s about to ask, but Bucky beats him to it.

“I’ll teach you.”

Peter’s nightly routine of going “on patrol” is pretty much exactly what Bucky pictured. The kid dons his costume and takes to the rooftops with his “web-shooters,” swinging from building to building and using his heightened senses to look for trouble or nefarious activity from above.

Bucky observes until the kid is out of sight, staying behind to wait. They’ve picked the highest, barest rooftop they can find—somewhere they’re unlikely to be spotted, but with enough open space to be able to spar freely. Bucky gets warmed up while Peter does his patrol—the kid probably won’t need much stretching, after flying around like that—so Bucky uses the time to work out his less-used muscles, instead.

He hasn’t fought anyone since those thugs, the night he met Peter. His left arm feels a little rusty (no pun intended), the metal creaking and groaning as he practices punching forward with it, so Bucky elects to work on his other arm and legs in its place.

He doesn’t want to use his left arm against Peter, anyway, not even to spar.

*Especially* when it’s malfunctioning.

He’s worked up a decent sweat by the time Peter comes swinging back onto the roof, pulling off his mask and goggles and grinning at Bucky like he’s excited to see him.

“Guess what!” he says, bounding up to him. “I caught a car thief!”

“Oh?” says Bucky, noting the flushed, glistening skin tone on Peter’s happy face.

“Yeah! He was trying to pry the door open with a crowbar, so I stopped him and he got mad, and he tried to hit me with it, but I webbed him up and some nice lady who saw the whole thing called the cops, so I left a note saying what he did and left him for them.”

Bucky glances Peter over. “Did you get hit?”

“Uhm,” Peter looks down at himself, inspecting his arms, chest, and legs. “I don’t think so? Maybe. If I did, it doesn’t hurt anymore, so it probably won’t even bruise.”

Sighing, Bucky smooths his hair back out of his face. Thank God for this kid’s healing factor.

“So where do we start?” said kid asks, voice bubbling with excitement.

“To start,” Bucky answers, taking a few steps back until there’s a reasonable distance between them, “I want you to try and subdue me, the way you would any regular criminal. Luckily for you, your abilities seem most suited to mid-range distance combat. We’ll work on hand-to-hand later, as that’s most likely going to be a last resort for you. For now, let’s just focus on taking down and incapacitating an opponent. I want to see how you move.”

“Got it,” Peter says, pulling his mask and goggles back on.

“All right, then,” says Bucky, taking a defensive position. “Come at me.”

All in all, Bucky’s fairly impressed with Peter’s abilities.

It’s obvious the kid has spent countless hours learning and mastering his techniques, and on top of that, he’s a fast learner. His mobility—given his speed and super strength—is nothing short of incredible, and he’s quick-witted and light on his feet, not to mention resourceful. Bucky almost has a hard time believing this kid hasn’t spent his entire life playing superhero.

He doesn’t make it easy, using his own superior stamina and reflexes to dodge and counter every attempt to web him up, but Peter keeps pace with him pretty evenly throughout the battle. They do end up sparring a little bit hand-to-hand, and while Peter’s strategy seems to mostly consist of, “do every conceivable action besides punching” for some reason, his method of knocking his opponent back to gain some needed distance is well-practiced and efficient.

He’s a novice, but the potential is overwhelming. Bucky almost feels a little daunted.

The fight is won when Peter successfully immobilizes his right arm, as Bucky hesitates on countering an incoming assault with his left, leaving Peter open to web his legs and torso, too, essentially gluing him to the rooftop floor.

“Woo!” Peter cheers with a little hop, arms held up in victory, before he groans and sags down to his knees. “Ugh, crap, I’m so tired.”

“Yeah. Good fight, kid,” Bucky says, severing the webbing around his right arm and shoulder with a sharp, mechanical tug with his left. “I have a pretty good idea of what we need to work on now.”

“Uh, here, lemme help,” Peter says as he clambers over, removing his mask again, then kneeling to

help tear away the webbing around one of Bucky's legs while the man does the other. "Uhm, sorry I went kind of overboard. I've never had to fight that hard before, so I, uhh…"

"Don't sweat it, kid," Bucky says, peeling away the last of the webbing from his clothes and standing up, then extending a hand to Peter. "You did good. And you were able to take me down without trying to murder me in an adrenaline-fueled frenzy, so bonus points there."

Peter's face twists with an almost comical amount of alarm. "Is—is that normal?"

Bucky shrugs. "Fighting, even for pretend, can bring out the animal in some people. But you have good instincts. That's important."

"Well…" Peter starts, alarm lifting and a shy, somewhat confused blush settling in in its place. "Uhh, thanks, I guess."

He gives Bucky a small smile, but there's an edge to it; a torrent of emotion in the boy's eyes that he hides by turning his gaze back down to the floor.

There's clearly *something* Peter doesn't like about what Bucky just said—something that's worrying him, weighing him down. For a moment, Bucky wonders if maybe the kid is more scared of getting hurt than he's let on, but he doubts it. Peter's admitted to being afraid before and didn't seem ashamed to do so, so it must be something else.

He's pretty sure he knows what.

"You kept a level head and didn't, for even a second, forget your own strength," Bucky says, tone even and assuring. "You know you're stronger than most people, and could easily win every fight if you stopped worrying about hurting others, but you don't. You hold back, even if it puts yourself in danger to do so, because it's the right thing to do. You need to trust yourself, Peter. You don't want to hurt people. You need to trust that, when it really matters, the part of you that cares more about protecting others than about winning fights will be the one in control."

Peter smiles at him, the worry ebbing away, his eyes shining for a moment before he lowers his gaze again. Something—else?—crosses his face, an expression Bucky can't discern, midway between fond and sad; content and concerned.

"You too," the boy says, almost too quiet for him to hear. "The same goes for you, too, Bucky."

Bucky blinks, brows furrowing. "What?"

"Earlier," says Peter, unsurely. "I only won 'cause you didn't want to hit me. I know I'm a kid, and you're gonna hold back because of that, but I don't think that's why. I—I think you're scared, too. Of hurting me. But you're the same as I am, so you need to trust yourself, too."

The kid smiles again, warmer, looking up at Bucky with such unwavering *faith* that for a moment, Bucky thinks he's going to be sick. *What the fuck am I doing,* he panics, staring into Peter's huge, dark, affectionate eyes. *I shouldn't even be talking to this kid. What the fuck have I done?*

Unaware of his internal turmoil, Peter heads over to where his backpack is sitting and starts pulling off his costume, stuffing it into the bottom of his almost-too-full bag.

Hoodie and jeans back on, he stands up, slinging his backpack over one shoulder before turning and grinning at Bucky again. "Hey, you hungry? There's a pizzeria across the street that's still open. My treat?"

*This has gone too far,* Bucky's mind pleads at him, desperately. *You're not who he thinks you are. You need to end this, right now, before he finds out.*

When he doesn't answer, Peter walks back over to him, glancing around the rooftop in the direction Bucky is hopelessly staring in.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Peter says, gesturing to the piles of strewn-about webbing, clumping and congealing across everything as a result of their fight. "It'll dissolve in a couple hours. Faster if it rains. We won't get in trouble, I promise!"

*You're dangerous. You know the way things are now won't last. Get this kid away from you, before something happens that you can't control. You can't control it. You can't control it. You're going to get him* k—

A hand, gently wrapping around his metal one, snaps Bucky from his thoughts as he glances down in surprise. The boy's hand softly laces with Bucky's left, coaxing it open from the tight, groaning fist it had clenched itself into, giving his fingers a slight, reassuring squeeze. Bucky can feel Peter's palm, thin and so, so *small,* sitting delicately in his fist, holding his fingers, the skin warm against his metal digits.

"See?" Peter says, quiet and still smiling, gently squeezing his hand again. "It's okay."

Bucky can't say anything, can't respond to the absolute certainty in the boy's voice, how sure of himself—of *Bucky*—he is. How the fuck can this kid trust him this much so soon? Bucky isn't even confident he won't kill himself some days, let alone other people.

But this kid is. He's sure. He trusts him.

Maybe Bucky can trust him, too.

"Come on, let's get pizza!" Peter beams, putting his other arm through the strap of his backpack. "I'm starving!"

He starts heading for the door to the staircase, his usual, bubbly, oblivious self, and then stops when he notices Bucky still hasn't moved. He looks back at him, eyes bright, and opens his mouth to say something, when a strong gust of biting, cold wind sweeps across the rooftop and hits both of them. Bucky hardly feels it, but Peter starts visibly trembling, instantly wrapping his arms around himself and burying the lower half of his face in the collar of his hoodie.

The sight has Bucky moving before he even realizes it, grabbing Peter's hood with his metal hand and sliding it over the kid's head, which he then gives a short, gentle pat.

"Okay, kid," he says, letting go and heading for the door. "Pizza it is."

Bucky doesn't get much sleep that night.

Between thinking something awful happened to Peter when he didn't show up, to learning that the kid doesn't live at home, to the unsettling realization that Peter is under some very damaging delusions about Bucky's character, not to mention the all-consuming fear that he is directly putting a child, who trusts him implicitly, in harm's way, well—to put it lightly, yesterday had been a long fucking day.

He goes about his usual Saturday activities, passing time until he has to walk what's-her-face's

dogs. Peter asked last night if he could stop by a little earlier today, since there's no school, so Bucky wants to go and get the job over with as soon as possible.

It's minute forty of a sixty minute walk, Bucky coming around a corner in the sidewalk with one dog leashed to each arm, when he almost runs straight into a kid. Not just any kid, *his*—no, *the* kid.

"Whoa!" Peter says, jumping back to avoid colliding right into Bucky's chest. "Hey, Bucky!"

"Kid," Bucky says in lieu of a greeting, pulling on the leashes when the dogs rear up to sniff at the boy curiously.

Peter gasps, face lighting up like the sun. "Oh my God, who are you guys!" he exclaims, dropping to his knees and trying to pet both dogs, who begin lavishing him with excited, wet kisses. Ugh. "What're their names?" he asks, looking up at Bucky from under a canopy of dog tongues.

How the hell should he know? He doesn't even remember their *owner's* name.

"They're dogs," he tries, hoping that that'll satisfy Peter, but knowing that it won't.

He is right.

"Dogs need names, too!" Peter huffs, grabbing the bigger dog's collar and looking at the tag. "You're… Tessa," he says, grinning, and then reaches for the other dog's tag, too. "And you're… Dodger. Nice to meet you guys!"

"Kid," Bucky tries again, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice. "They're *dogs.*"

"*Good* dogs!"

Bucky sighs, pulling on the leashes again when Peter tries to stand up, to give him room. He notices the kid's backpack seems completely full again—but he didn't have school today, right? So it's most likely not full of books. Not to mention, they're decently far away from Bucky's apartment. Groceries, maybe?

"What are you doing here?" he asks, not bothering to mask the confusion in his voice.

Peter glances up at him, a familiar, sheepish blush spreading across his cheeks. "Killing time."

Bucky frowns. "Until what?"

"Until…" Peter says, then stops, giving Bucky a shy smile and a shrug. "Uhh, I just thought it'd be rude to come over too early, I guess."

His frown deepens.

Why didn't he just wait at home?

"Whose dogs are these?" Peter asks, before Bucky can voice his own question.

"Just a lady that needed someone to walk them," he says.

Peter's eyes light up again. "Can I help you walk them?" he practically begs, his eagerness palpable.

Bucky hands him the leash for the bigger dog—Tessa, apparently—and Peter grins like Bucky just gave him a bar of solid gold.

“This is awesome!” he says, falling in line beside Bucky. “Come on, Tessa!”

He doesn’t tell Peter to curb his enthusiasm, somehow unable to hold on to his earlier grumpiness, watching the kid ramble at the dog the same way he does to Bucky. Tessa, for what it’s worth, is a much more gleeful listener than Bucky is, though eventually Peter tires of repeatedly asking her, “Who’s a good girl?” with not-exactly-varying results.

“So, uhm,” Peter says after a while, on their way to return the dogs. “I don’t know if you’re interested, but, I brought some movies? I figured that might be more fun than me just babbling all night like usual. I know you don’t have a TV, so I brought my laptop, if you want? I borrowed some DVDs from this kid at school—his name’s Ned, I really like him, we get along really well—anyway, he let me borrow his Star Wars collection. Do you like Star Wars?”

The safest bet when talking with Peter, Bucky’s learned, is to just answer the last question asked during his excited spiel, and then wait for him to repeat any other questions he decides he needs answered, when he inevitably re-asks them. “I don’t know.”

“You’ve never seen *Star Wars?”* Peter gapes, looking at Bucky with nothing short of complete indignation. “Oh, my God, we *have* to watch them! I mean—if you want to!”

Bucky smiles, and doesn’t bother to hide it. “Sure, kid.”

“Let me get this straight,” Bucky says, staring at the small laptop screen in front of them, resting innocently on Bucky’s shitty barstool. “The second movie is actually the fifth?”

Peter laughs, wedged beside Bucky on the dingy loveseat, taking another bite of their homemade sandwiches. “Episodes one, two, and three are prequel-sequels. They come first, but were made after.”

Bucky frowns, watching the screen with a puckered brow. “So they made episode four first?”

“Uh huh,” Peter grins, clearly taking way too much amusement in Bucky’s confusion. “Weird, right?”

“It’s illogical.”

The kid bursts out laughing, curling up until his head almost touches the armrest and his knees are pressed up against Bucky’s left arm. “I know, right? I don’t know what they were thinking.”

Bucky can’t agree more. Confusing timelines aside, the movies are actually pretty good. Bucky’s impressed by the special effects—which insults Peter, for some reason, who resolutely insists that they can’t hold up to modern day movie magic and that they didn’t age well—and that leads to the admission that Bucky’s never actually *seen* a movie before, which startles Peter almost out of his seat.

“*Never?”* he asks, eyebrows raised almost all the way to his hairline. “Not even before you left Brooklyn?”

Bucky can tell that he’s said something wrong—something abnormal, that Peter’s suspicious—but how the hell was he supposed to know how common it is to watch movies? It’s not like Peter made a big deal out of him not having a TV or a computer in his apartment.

“Maybe I did,” he tries, not bothering to hide the confusion in his voice. “A long time ago. If I did,

I don't remember."

That seems to relax Peter, and the boy smiles, getting an excited gleam in his eyes. "Oh, man, do you know what that means? There are *so* many awesome movies I gotta show you now. Like—oh my God, you haven't seen Lord of the Rings either?!"

He barely even has a chance to shake his head *no* before Peter's ranting again. "We *have* to watch it! Next time. For sure. Oh, but wait, we might need to spread it out—there's only three movies, but they're each four hours long, so we'll need pretty much a whole day to binge them."

"Hell, kid. Where do you find the time to sit and watch a twelve-hour-long movie?"

Peter grins, shrugging with one shoulder as his cheeks go a little pink. "Before I became Spider-Man, I used to have lots of free time, actually. Movies and video games were pretty much all I did."

"Hmm," Bucky says, not knowing what else to say. He doesn't exactly know what video games are, and he doesn't want to alarm the kid any further by asking.

A couple peaceful moments of silence go by, Peter focusing entirely on the laptop; Bucky more looking at the movie than watching it. It's entertaining, but he isn't at all immersed. While the costumes and fake spaceships and glowing laser-swords are cool, Bucky elects to mostly just observe the video onscreen with a safe level of detachment.

Predictably, Peter breaks the silence first. "Hey, are we gonna train again tonight?"

"Yes," Bucky says, without looking at him. "We'll train every day until I know you can properly defend yourself."

He expects Peter to give a typically-excited response, something akin to, "Oh, cool!" or, "Wow, okay, that's awesome!" or, "Oh my God, I can't wait!" or something equally hyper and childish. He's used to Peter being overjoyed over everything, no matter how small, so when no response comes, and Bucky looks over and Peter is staring at him, wide-eyed and perplexed, Bucky mentally hiccups for a second.

"What?" he asks, mirroring Peter's confused expression. "What's wrong?"

Peter's mouth opens but no words come out, and he closes it again, frowning. Seeing the usually-talkative kid so lost for words throws Bucky for a loop—was it something he said?

"It's just…" Peter finally manages, voice quiet and tone—*sad*…? "It's just, I'm, uhm—I'm surprised, I guess. That you would want to do that. I feel kind of—uh, I feel bad that I've been coming over so much. Imposing, I mean. I-I've been coming over every single day, and I know that that's kind of rude, so I was gonna apologize and come over less, but… I didn't want to. I like hanging out with you, and I don't have—" he cuts himself off, eyes widening as though surprised, then immediately starts talking again, faster.

"So I just—I don't know, I was working up the nerve to start coming by less often, 'cause it must be annoying having me here all the time, so hearing you say you'll train me every day took me by surprise, is all. Sorry."

"Kid," Bucky says, slow and even, compared to Peter's frantic rambling. "You're not imposing."

Peter's voice is quiet and timid, and sounds more childlike than Bucky's ever heard it. "Really?"

“Look at me,” he says, more firmly now, twisting around to mirror Peter’s position on the loveseat, facing the boy with his back pressed against the armrest, one leg folded on the seat, while Peter’s are curled up protectively to his chest. “Do I seem like somebody who would lie to make a person feel better?”

“No,” Peter answers quietly, shaking his head.

“Exactly. If you were annoying me, I’d tell you. I don’t mind that you come by every day, kid. Really.”

Peter smiles, but it’s forced and short-lived. His eyes begin to slightly mist over—and Bucky isn’t at all prepared for *that.* The movie comes to an end, music carrying through the small speakers and into Bucky’s mostly-empty apartment, as the two of them sit and stare at each other, until Peter lowers his wet gaze down to his feet.

The video ends and the music stops and silence fills the room, Peter not saying a word as he holds back tears, and Bucky doesn’t know why. He doesn’t know why his company—*his* company, of all people—means so much to this kid, doesn’t know what Peter could possibly be gaining by spending time with him, besides a sizeable chunk out of his savings, doesn’t know anything about Peter, really, who he is or where he came from or why he’s crying.

But he wants to.

He wants to ask, but he waits, letting Peter compose himself first. When his eyes are mostly dry, Peter finally looks back up at him, no doubt intending to say something, probably to apologize, but Bucky speaks first, before he can.

“Where are your parents?”

If Peter’s surprised by the question, he doesn’t show it. His expression is unreadable, gazing past Bucky like he’s seeing through him. When he answers, his voice is detached, sounds like he’s been crying way harder than he really has.

“They died a long time ago.”

Bucky waits, hoping Peter will say more, but the boy remains uncharacteristically quiet, curled up against the armrest. Normally he’d let it go—has no real desire to pry—but he wants to understand, needs to know where this kid came from, how he ended up here.

“Peter,” he says, surprised by the gentleness in his own voice. The kid looks up at him, eyes wide and dark and so, so unbearably filled with grief. “Tell me what happened.”

The kid swallows, taking a deep breath and tightening his arms around his knees for a moment, before he exhales and sags further into the couch.

“I was born in Manhattan,” he says, quiet and soft. “When I was five, my parents left for a work trip, and their plane crashed. I don’t remember them that well, honestly. I don’t even think I’d know what they looked like if I didn’t have photos.”

Bucky listens, still and silent, lets the kid talk at his own, unhurried pace.

“My aunt and uncle took me in. May and Ben. They raised me, and even though they weren’t, I considered them my parents, you know? They were there through everything. And they were amazing. They went through a lot to make sure I was taken care of, and we—we were always really happy.”

He doesn't miss the fact that Peter's using past tense. Bucky's throat begins to feel like it's closing up.

"Last summer…" Peter starts, then stops himself, his eyes welling up again. "You know how I said, I go to a rich school? One of my dad's old friends—kind of an old colleague, I guess—he's this rich scientist, and he offered to write me a letter of recommendation to help me get in if I did some work for him. Mostly just mindless lab work, to be honest. I think he just wanted an extra pair of hands he didn't have to pay for. Anyway—that's where I got bit. By the spider."

He looks down at his hands, staring at them like he's expecting them to look different than they usually do. When he speaks, his voice is so rife with despair that Bucky doesn't even recognize it. "I knew something was wrong pretty much right away. All my senses were suddenly heightened to a crazy level, not to mention I was stronger, faster—I wanted to tell my aunt and uncle, but I couldn't. They really wanted me to go to this school, but they didn't approve of me accepting Mr. Osborn's help—my uncle really disliked him, for some reason—so I couldn't tell them what happened."

Pressing himself deeper into the corner of the armrest and the back of the couch, Peter wraps his arms around his curled-up legs again, practically folding himself into a ball. "Right before school started…" he says, tears overflowing from his eyes, running down his cheeks in wide, fat streams. "My aunt and uncle went on a date. I was at home, and… something was wrong. I know now that it's because of the spider bite, but I have this, like—this sense, I guess. I get a feeling, like when there's danger, or something isn't *right,* and that night—I—"

He takes a shuddering breath, hands fisted in the denim of his jeans as he desperately tries to keep himself from sobbing. Bucky feels rooted in his seat, frozen solid to the core. He knows what the end of this story is, but he's silently begging to be proven wrong.

"Something was wrong," Peter says, nearly a sob. "I knew something was wrong. I could feel it. I ran all the way to the restaurant where they were having dinner, and—there were all these cops and ambulances, and they tried not to let me through but I ran past them, and—there they were, just… lying there, beside our car. Someone shot them. Police said it was a mugging. My aunt's purse and my uncle's wallet were gone."

Peter lets his head drop, resting his forehead on his knees as he cries, silent and unnoticeable, save for the trembling in his shoulders. Bucky's heart feels cold in his chest, like it's pumping ice through his veins instead of blood. He doesn't know what to say. All the grief Peter's felt in his short life, losing his parents—twice—not to mention the changes his body went through, all by himself, dealing with that and God knows what else, on the heels of burying the two people he loved most in all the world.

Taking another deep breath, Peter lifts his head, his face completely red and wet from crying, and he wipes at it with the back of his hoodie's sleeve, breathing through his mouth as he sniffles, trying to regain his composure. He doesn't look up at Bucky, keeping his gaze fixed on his knees, eyes tired and darker than Bucky thought possible for the kid.

"I'm in foster care now," Peter says, almost a mumble. "My aunt and uncle paid a small fortune to get me into that school, so I'm really lucky that I'm still able to go. It's kept me going. That and being Spider-Man. I know that if—if May and Ben were alive, I know they'd—May would want me to stay in school, and Ben, if he knew about my powers, he'd want me to help people, so—so I have that, to do right by them. To make sure I make them proud."

He doesn't want to interrupt, but the memory of what Delmar said—about Peter having "bad homes"—comes to mind so strongly that Bucky can't stop himself before he says, "Your foster

home is willing to pay for that expensive school?"

Peter finally looks up at him, eyes widening at the question, before he glances back down and stares at his lap with a frustrated frown.

"No," he almost whispers, quiet and sad. "That's what I'm tutoring for. My aunt and uncle paid the fees for this year, but I—I need to save up for next year's."

Bucky frowns back, eyebrows knitting together. "Kid, if you need to save money for your school fees, why are you spending so much on food all the time?"

Peter glances at him, frown falling away and a look of confusion replacing it.

"Because…" he says slowly, like he isn't sure what Bucky meant, "I gotta eat…?"

Bucky's frown deepens. "Why don't you just eat at home?"

Something flashes across the kid's face—apprehension, maybe, or maybe even anxiety—but either way, he looks momentarily fretful, like he doesn't want to answer that question.

Eyes narrowing, Bucky leans forward, disturbed. "Are they not feeding you?"

Peter purses his lips together like he's trying to keep himself from talking, then curls tighter into himself and says, "It's just—it's a long story."

Bucky lets his expression soften, trying to sound gentle and reassuring. "It's okay," he says. "You can tell me."

He can see the hesitation in the kid's eyes, in his body language—whatever it is, Peter obviously has reservations about telling him, but eventually he sighs and looks back down, always afraid to meet Bucky's eyes when he's nervous.

"The first couple of homes were the worst ones," he says, audibly reluctant. "They were—there were a lot of bad things going on. They were… abusive, I guess. I tried to defend myself, but I never wanted to use my full strength, because then I'd hurt people, and—and they'd find out I wasn't normal. So I just took it and then tried to tell my social worker. But the thing is, nobody ever believed me, because I have super-healing and the bruises and stuff were always gone by the time I tried to get help."

Bucky's left hand trembles along the back of the couch, the nerves in his shoulder plate misfiring from the force of the sudden *rage* that torpedoes through him. He grasps his metal wrist with his right hand—as subtly as he can, so as not to interrupt Peter—and presses his thumb along the underside of his left wrist, to manually release the unexpected flood of furious energy that shoots down his limb.

Peter, thankfully oblivious, keeps talking.

"I didn't stop trying to get someone involved. There were other kids in the first home, I wasn't the only one. I tried to protect them, but that just meant being the punching bag while—"

He grips the back of the loveseat so hard, he can feel the wood beneath the cushions start to splinter beneath his metal fingers.

"—still not being able to prove there was any abuse. Eventually, after this happened a couple of times in a couple of different homes, they just labeled me a 'problem case,' and, well—my social

worker basically told me, if I keep causing trouble, they're gonna move me out of Queens, and that means I'd have to switch schools. I can't let that happen, so, I just—I haven't really stuck around this new place."

Bucky's anger lifts, abruptly and jarringly, as he finally figures out the thing he's wanted to know the most.

Peter has nowhere to go.

"It's not a regular foster home," Peter says, still keeping his gaze averted. "It's more like a halfway house, but for problem kids like me. It's an all-boys residence, but it's way, way too overcrowded, and there's food served, but never enough—eating means someone else goes without. There aren't even enough beds, a lot of kids just end up sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags, and—I don't know. I just… can't stand being there. I know I should be grateful to have shelter at all, but—I don't want to get in anymore trouble and end up having to leave my school. So I've just been staying away. The lady who runs the place hasn't even noticed. I think she thinks I ran away and didn't care enough to report it. I've been living out of my locker at school and my backpack, mostly, and sneaking into the gymnasium at night."

"Kid," Bucky says, voice sounding as wrecked as he feels.

Peter cuts him off. "I know, okay? I know it's wrong, and I should go back and just—keep my head down, but, it—it just stresses me out so much, I'm less scared of being caught breaking into school than I am of staying at the halfway house."

"Kid," Bucky tries again, firmer now, though Peter doesn't even seem to hear him.

"I'm sorry. I really am. I promise I haven't been, like, trying to take advantage of—of how nice you are to me, or anything. I know I'm being pretty greedy and kind of selfish, I get it, I just can't —I can't explain what it's been like, to be able to come here and hang out with you and eat, like, *actual* meals, and walk dogs and talk and—and I don't know, I'm sorry for latching on to you like this, I know it's not cool, and it's weird but, I just feel so *safe* when I'm here with you, and I haven't felt that in months, and—"

His hand is moving before he can stop it, gripping Peter's own, smaller one and holding it firmly in his metal fist. Peter shuts up, looking between Bucky's face and their hands, his eyes tracing each finger and knuckle of Bucky's prosthetic with wide, curious eyes.

"Look at me," Bucky says, pleased with how tender his voice sounds, given the furious hurricane whirling within him. "You can't live in your school, kid. And there's no way in *hell* that I'm letting you go back to that fucking prison. You can stay with me."

Peter reels back in a flinch, surprised and stunned. "What?"

"I said," Bucky repeats, emphatically, "I'm not letting you go back to that place. No way in hell. You can stay with me, Peter."

Peter's disbelieving expression makes him look nearly half his age, his big, brown eyes wide, and wet, and dark.

"Really?" he whispers.

"Yeah, kid, really," Bucky says, and smiles at him. "You can stay with me."

He wants to reassure him further—wants to tell him, *you can take the loveseat, we'll grab some*

*more furniture, I'll take care of you, I promise,* but he doesn't get the chance, because the next thing he knows, he has a lapful of crying teenager, Peter's thin arms wrapped tightly around his neck, nearly crushing him in an almost-bruising hug. Peter presses his face hard against Bucky's chest, trying to muffle the sobs pouring out of him, and Bucky sits, somewhat at a loss, not knowing what to do.

Peter clings to him, desperately, and there's something terribly familiar about this feeling—of small arms, around his neck, holding on to him. As if by muscle memory alone, his own arms come up and wrap around Peter, too, cradling him against his chest and hugging him there.

He lets a foggy, distant memory of holding someone like this take the reins from him, letting his body do what it wants to do, and he ends up pulling Peter fully into his lap and rocking him gently, one hand on the back of his head and the other over his spine, cuddling him in a firm yet gentle hold. Peter's hands stay fisted in his shirt, his slight frame trembling under the force of his tears, and Bucky just lets him, carding his metal fingers through the boy's messy curls, and then pressing the lower half of his face to the top of Peter's head, tenderly.

"It's all right, kid," he whispers against the boy's hair. "I've got you."

It takes some time, but eventually, Peter falls asleep like that, his vice-like grip in Bucky's shirt finally loosening as he nods off. Bucky waits a little longer, until he's sure the boy is sound asleep, and then carefully maneuvers him off his lap and onto the loveseat, smoothing down his hair as the boy curls up, laying his head gently on the armrest.

Bucky grabs his thin, fleece blanket off his mattress and tucks it over Peter, smiling unreservedly when the boy buries his face all the way up to his eyes underneath it. With one last, gentle pat to his head, Bucky stands up, grabs his cellphone and notebook, and steps out onto the balcony.

He isn't expecting an answer—it is Saturday night, after all—but now that he's gone and taken on this responsibility, he really can't afford to wait any longer.

By the time the answering machine picks up, Bucky knows exactly what he's going to say.

"Hi, Frank, this is Jim Barnes. I wanted to call and say that I've made up my mind, and if you're still interested…"

He looks back through the doorway, at Peter, curled up and sleeping soundly.

"I'll take the job."

Chapter End Notes

> And with that, Part 1 of this story comes to a close. I'm sorry this chapter wasn't as fluffy—I promise there isn't going to be tons of angst in this fic. If it helps, the next chapter is going to heavily feature some real father/son bonding moments for Bucky and Peter, haha.
>
> Again, thank you so, so much for reading, everyone. It means a lot! I hope you all enjoyed this chapter!
>
> Much love! <3

# These Days Together With You

Chapter Notes

**WARNING:**

There's one scene in this chapter that features an evil dude *attempting* to do a super gross and evil thing, which leads to some minor T-rated violence as he gets swiftly and justifiably Liam Neeson'd by an angry dad.

If you're sensitive to the topic of a sexual predator attempting to be a sexual predator and then getting his shit fucked up for it, please use your discretion for this chap.

Otherwise, enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Peter wakes up, hours later, Bucky is sprawled out on his mattress, not really trying to sleep, simply resting in the dark and quiet of the apartment.

“Hey,” Peter says, voice roughened by sleep and from crying so much earlier. Bucky looks up at him from the mattress on the floor and takes in the boy’s disheveled look; the bedhead, the tear tracks on his cheeks.

“How you feeling?” he asks.

Peter stretches, arms and legs hanging off the ends of the loveseat, before he relaxes again and blinks up at the ceiling, considering. “Thirsty.”

Bucky smiles, reaches over and grabs the not-quite-empty bottle of Gatorade they’d been sharing earlier. “Here,” he says as he tosses it up to the loveseat, impressed by the effortless way Peter catches it.

A few minutes of silence goes by after Peter drains the bottle, and it feels alien to Bucky—as familiar as he is with his apartment being quiet, Peter can’t seem to stand silences—though, maybe he just isn’t a morning person; one of those people who needs extra time for their personality to manifest after they first wake up.

The silence stretches on, both of them staring up at the dark ceiling from their respective sleeping surfaces, until Peter quietly breaks the hush by whispering, “Did you really mean what you said?”

Bucky turns to look at him, and Peter rolls over on his side, curling up and gazing at Bucky with his big, dark eyes that look black from the lack of light in the room.

“Yes,” he tells him, keeping their gazes locked together. “I meant it, kid. I know this place is a dump, and it’ll be cramped, but we’ll make it work. You can keep tutoring and save for your school fees, and I’ll handle the rest. I took a full-time job earlier.”

“You did?” Peter asks, visibly surprised. “I mean, that’s—that’s awesome, congrats! What, uh,

what kind of job is it?"

"Mechanic," he replies, stretching out himself, wincing slightly when his left arm falters, the kink in the metal disrupting his movement. He notices the worried look Peter gives him and says, before the kid can ask if he's all right, "Helping this old man fix up old beaters so he can sell 'em. I'm just hoping he has some bikes on that lot of his."

"Bikes?" Peter repeats, his interest piqued. "You mean like—like motorcycles?"

Bucky smiles. "Yeah," he says, and doesn't bother to mention that the ID he swiped was a motorcycle license—or that that wasn't exactly an accident. "Been a long time since I've been able to get my hands on a bike."

"I've never been on a motorcycle," Peter says. "What's it like? Isn't it scary?"

"Nah," he shrugs, still smiling. "Have you ever ridden a horse?"

"Like… a real one?"

Bucky shoots him a salacious look, sniggering a little under his breath. "No, I mean one of those wooden sticks with a horse head on the end. *Yes,* a real one, you punk."

Giggling, Peter nestles further into the couch, pulling the blanket tighter around him. "No, I haven't. Uh, why?"

"Riding a horse and riding a bike aren't really similar at all," Bucky says, "but if you'd been on a horse before, you'd know what to expect after riding a bike. Your legs will hurt like a bitch. Unless you do it often, you'll be walking funny for the next couple days. It's not nearly as bad on a bike as it is on a horse, though. But you're a shrimp, so even a bike would probably make your thighs cramp up the next day."

Peter listens, watching him curiously from where he's lounging on the loveseat as Bucky talks, with a look on his face like he's simply enjoying listening to the man speak. Then he says, "I think I'd rather ride a horse than a bike, personally."

Bucky grins, unsurprised. "Really? You? The kid who pets every single animal he sees? I'm shocked."

Peter grins back, turning over onto his back and gazing up at the ceiling again. "I can't help it. I like animals."

"Again, shocked."

"Ha-ha."

Peter closes his eyes, and Bucky glances at him, waiting to see if the kid will fall back asleep or not. He lies still and absolutely quiet, willing his own body to relax enough to drift off, watching Peter mindfully breathe in and out as he attempts to make himself go to sleep.

After a while of neither one of them successfully nodding off, Peter opens his eyes again, glancing over at Bucky as he says, "I can't sleep."

"I can see that," Bucky replies.

"I need to go on patrol," says Peter as he sits up. "I just—I'm too restless. I gotta go check things

out."

Bucky frowns. "It's pretty late," he says, the barest hint of sternness in his tone.

Peter looks back up at him, midway through standing up from the couch. "But…" he starts, unsurely, glancing down at the loveseat and then turning his pleading gaze back to Bucky. "…It's Saturday?"

In spite of himself, Bucky can't help the smile that spreads back across his face, helpless in the wake of the kid's somewhat-pouting expression.

"All right, all right," he says as he stands up also, grabbing his jacket, gloves and hat from the floor beside his mattress. "I'll make you a deal. I'll go with you, you can patrol, and then we'll do a little training after to make sure we burn all that energy you have, so we can come back and get some sleep. Sound fair?"

"Yeah!" Peter beams, slipping his backpack on over his hoodie and then donning his shoes beside Bucky at the door.

They find a new rooftop in a different part of Queens, switching it up so that Peter can patrol a different area each night, and to avoid making a pattern, though Bucky doesn't tell Peter about that part of it. Peter steps into his Spider-Man outfit, attaches his web-shooters to his wrists, and says, "Okay, I'll be back soon!"

"Just a short patrol," Bucky says. "Just an hour. I don't want you screwing up your sleep schedule."

"Okay," Peter says, and Bucky can hear the smile in his voice.

He watches the kid swing off the roof without a single fear of falling, and casually leans forward on the railing so he can keep watching until Peter is out of sight.

When the boy is gone, Bucky lets himself sag, lets the tension leave his muscles as he drops most of his upper body onto the railing, hanging his head exhaustedly. What the fuck is he doing? What is he going to tell Peter when Hydra—or *Captain America*—finds him? And what will happen to the kid then? Peter has already made some pretty big sacrifices just so he could stay in Queens; pretty safe bet he wouldn't be willing to drop everything and run away with Bucky to Romania if they were ever found.

But what, then? Would Peter choose to stay here, all alone? Go back to living in his school and having no one, the same as Bucky? Living off of gas station food and forgetting what it feels like to have a home? Could he do that?

Could Bucky?

There's no point in trying to convince himself anymore that he isn't attached now—he knows he is, knew it that day when Peter was late getting home from school, when all Bucky could think of is how badly he needed the kid to be all right. He cares for Peter, and he *wants* this; he wants to give the kid the best home he can, wants to make sure Peter has somewhere safe to go and someone looking after him, even someone as fucked up as he is, because damn it, for everything that is shit in his life, he won't let this be shit, too. He'll find a way to do right by this kid. He has to.

Accepting Frank's offer had been a step—at least he'll be able to provide food and shelter. But what about his plan? What would Peter want, and worse, how the fuck is Bucky supposed to ask him? He can't tell him who he is. Worse than Peter being scared of him, he could become a target

for Hydra if they found out he had information on Bucky. And if *they* found out about Peter's abilities…

A sharp, metallic *crack* snaps Bucky from his thoughts. He glances down and sees his arm fisted tensely in the roof's concrete railing, the metal groaning and bending unnaturally as it squeezes the concrete like playdough. Bucky has to manually dislodge it, and spends the rest of the hour trying to maneuver his arm back into its usual position, untwisting it from its bent angle just in time as Peter lands gracefully beside him.

"Pretty quiet night," he says, then notices Bucky holding his arm and quickly adds, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," says Bucky, letting his arm drop to his side and hiding the slight discomfort he feels when it doesn't hang as straight as it was previously. "It's just being temperamental again. You good?"

Peter doesn't look convinced, eyeing him worriedly even as he says, "Yeah. Stopped a Grand Theft Bicycle, scared off a couple of sketchy loiterers, and caught some lady's houseplant when she accidentally knocked it off her windowsill."

Bucky grins, reaching over with his right hand as Peter pulls his mask off and ruffling his already-unruly curls. "The hero this city truly needs."

Peter's eyes light up. "That's what we should watch next! Batman!"

"Tomorrow," says Bucky, leaving no room for argument. "We still have some training to do before it's lights out for you, pal. How would you feel about a race?"

Blinking, Peter scans the rooftop, confused. "Here?"

"No, I was thinking we could hit the park on the way home," he replies, not missing the warm look in Peter's eyes when he says *home.* "If anyone asks, we can just say we're training for a marathon."

"At 1:30 A.M.?"

Bucky shrugs. "It's more believable than saying you're Spider-Man and you can't sleep."

Peter laughs, shooting Bucky a mock-glare before he pulls his regular clothes out from his bag and begins changing into them. They head to the park between here and their apartment, stopping at the entrance and surveying how empty and dark the wooded area is as Bucky glances up at the sign beside the trail.

"The trail is just under two miles long," he says, reading from the sign. "So if we do five laps, that should be enough to burn some energy."

Peter nods, already stretching his legs, arms and back as he stares down the pitch-dark path. "What are we racing for?"

"Loser does a thousand push-ups."

"Ugh," Peter groans, before grinning up at him playfully. "In that case, you are *so* going down."

Bucky scoffs, returning the playful expression on the kid's face with a raised eyebrow. "Yeah, we'll see about that, pipsqueak. On your marks…"

Bucky doesn't hold back, and feels no shame about doing so. After all, the whole point of this is to

tire the kid out enough that he can sleep. He has no qualms about using his enhanced speed; and besides, Peter has enhanced speed, too.

But Bucky's used to sprinting long distances, used to running—to chasing and being chased—and while Peter's in good shape, he clearly hasn't had to sprint like this outside of gym class. Bucky loses him in the first thirty seconds, and by the time he finishes all three laps, Peter is a solid two minutes behind him and is dead on his feet when he comes jogging around the corner.

Panting and exhausted, the kid leans forward and rests his hands on his knees, heaving in big gulps of air as his chest lurches.

"That—" he gasps, completely out of breath, "—*sucked.*"

"It's about to suck even more," Bucky grins. "Drop and give me a thousand."

"*What?"*

"Hey, those were the stakes," he says, a shit-eating grin spreading across his face. "Loser does a thousand push-ups, so down you get."

He can't help but burst out laughing at the absolutely pathetic whine Peter makes when he collapses down on the ground, exhaustedly getting into position and begrudgingly pushing himself back up as he begins to count. He goes steady for a solid ten minutes, before his movements become completely sluggish and half-assed, until he finally drops flat on the ground, gasping.

"I'm dying," he pants.

"Come on, you still have seventy to go," Bucky says, but he can see that Peter's eyes are hardly staying open, that they appear unfocused, blurry in the wake of his exhaustion. Bucky kneels down in front of him just as Peter closes his eyes, passing out.

"Come on, kid," Bucky says as he gently lifts Peter up, turning and pulling him up onto his back in a piggyback, holding him by his legs. Peter's arms dangle from Bucky's shoulders, before they tighten sleepily around his neck, just scarcely tight enough to hold him up. "Let's get you home."

Peter is well-and-truly asleep before they even make it out of the park, the embodiment of a deep, well-earned, relaxed sleep, warm and comforting against Bucky's back.

Everything is completely different, living with someone.

Bucky knew things wouldn't be the same, but it still surprises him just *how* different things are. The meager possessions Peter had stored around his school fill Bucky's otherwise-empty apartment and make it feel like a completely different place; the books, clothes, school projects spread around everywhere actually make it look like someone *lives* here, instead of just squatting in it.

His days are different, too, after starting his job. Frank is an older, bald, black gentleman who, blessedly, doesn't try and force Bucky into small-talk or casual conversations, instead leaving him alone to work in the garage behind his dealership, an arrangement that suits Bucky just fine. Sharon, Frank's wife and the dealership's receptionist, is a little more eager to get to know and befriend him, but thankfully Frank is always nearby to intercede on his behalf.

The Monday to Friday routine he and Peter have worked out is convenient and domestic, and leaves Bucky feeling like he's in a completely new place in his own home. They wake up and have breakfast together, take turns making their lunches to take with them (although Bucky ends up doing it quite a bit more often than Peter does) and then they head out, Bucky walking Peter to the train station before he gets on his own bus.

In the evenings, Bucky gets home a solid hour after Peter does, and typically finds the kid on the loveseat or at the counter doing his homework, or, on the rare days when he doesn't have any, watching movies on his laptop. Peter begs him to get internet in the apartment, but Bucky refuses —can't say yes, even if he wanted to—so sometimes, the kid leaves a note saying he went to the nearest café or library to use their Wi-Fi, and that he'll be home before dinner.

Dinner, unsurprisingly, is the one thing in Bucky's life that hasn't changed. It was already a domestic occurrence before Peter moved in; now, the only thing that's different is they have more money and typically make bigger meals. Peter actually gets to eat his fill, and it pleases and upsets Bucky in equal measure—happy that he can finally satisfy Peter's hunger, and angry that Peter was ever allowed to go without for so long in the first place.

On the weekends, Bucky still walks what's-her-face's dogs (usually with Peter tagging along), and still helps out the occasional caller for some cash on the side, and does some work at the motel when they need him to. He doesn't *have* to anymore—Frank pays him enough for rent, food, and savings combined—but he pockets the extra cash and uses it to make sure Peter has everything he needs—like *another* backpack, for example, since the kid had his stolen *again.*

Or, sometimes, he uses it to treat them to some take-out, like tonight. Peter had been begging him for the last straight week to take him back to Delmar's, so when Bucky brought in an extra eighty bucks on the weekend, they made plans to meet at Delmar's today for some much-deserved sandwiches.

Given that Peter gets out of class earlier than Bucky leaves work, he's probably already there, waiting for him, no doubt pestering Delmar in that plucky, good-natured way of his that always brings a smile to his face. Bucky gets off at the bus stop two blocks away and starts trekking to the sandwich stop, eyes scanning the streets as they always do, his cap pulled low, his jacket undone for the gradually-warming weather, only his left hand gloved.

He spots Peter from a couple hundred yards away, across a busy street, standing outside Delmar's store innocuously in his bright red hoodie. Bucky smiles to himself, watching the kid peer into the busy rush of afternoon traffic, searching the crowd of pedestrians for *him.*

The smile falters when, almost as if appearing out of nowhere, an older man walks up to Peter and begins speaking to him, a large, overly-friendly smile stretched across his face. Bucky moves, making a beeline for them, intently watching the changes in Peter's expression from across the street—the look of curiosity morphing into his usual, compassionate smile—before, to Bucky's incredulity, the man turns and begins walking down the street, Peter following behind him.

*Maybe they know each other,* Bucky silently hopes. *He's a smart kid, he has to know better than to go off with strangers,* he starts to think, before mentally kicking himself—Peter obviously *doesn't* know better—if he did, he never would have latched on to Bucky the way he had in the first place.

As he impatiently waits for the light on the crosswalk to turn green, he keeps his eyes on Peter's back, until he and the man he's trailing after turn a corner, disappearing from sight.

"Shit," Bucky curses, rudely maneuvering through the flock of pedestrians as he crosses the road, marching down the sidewalk in Peter's direction with more force than he normally would; typically

preferring to move stealthily, to blend in, to walk without being seen, but his nerves won't let him, urging him to stomp after the two of them almost aggressively, his unease billowing. Something doesn't feel right.

Bucky turns the corner, peering over the heads of the people littering the street, searching anxiously for Peter's red sweater or the man's balding head. He pushes past the people in his way, ignoring the outraged comments, serpentinely winding through the crowd, using his muscular build to his advantage, to incite others to make way for him.

There's no sign of Peter or the man—where could they have gone? Bucky makes it to another intersection and turns down each road frantically—they could have gone anywhere, but if the man has evil intentions as Bucky's dreading, he would have chosen the emptier road.

Bucky turns down the quieter, narrower road that leads directly into an industrial complex and begins agitatedly checking the alleyways separating each warehouse building, checking behind everything that would seem like a good place to hide behind if you didn't want to be seen, which is everywhere in this complex, given how deserted it is, all the workers having gone home for the day.

He checks everywhere, and is just about to turn around and head back to the crossroads when he peers down the last alley and sees them—Peter, lifting a heavy toolbox into the back of a pick-up truck, the man on the other end, clearly having no idea that Peter could easily lift it himself.

Bucky pauses, relief and something like embarrassment flooding him. Maybe he was being too—overprotective? Peter is a good kid who does nice things for people, and if some guy needed help loading his toolbox into his truck, who is Bucky to tell Peter he can't help?

He decides to go back, to wait for Peter outside Delmar's, when it happens.

They finish securing the toolbox in the truck, and the man closes the gate while Peter wipes his hands off on his jeans. But then, the man turns to Peter and places his hand on his arm—too low, too close to his elbow, a position that makes Bucky's nerves spike again—and then he's crowding Peter against the truck, leaning into him, saying something, though they're too far away for Bucky to hear.

*Hit him, kid,* Bucky internally screams, as the man grabs Peter by the shoulders. *Hit him!* But Peter doesn't, he doesn't fight back, he just stands there, unmoving. *Why isn't he moving?!*

And then Bucky sees his face—wide brown eyes, terrified, his whole body shrinking in on itself, plastered to the side of the truck where he's frozen in place, and Bucky is charging toward them as fast as he can, his arm already vibrating angrily in his sleeve, murderous rage erupting within him. Peter's legs are shaking, his small body boxed in by the man's larger one, one hand pinning his shoulder to the truck, and the other, reaching for *his belt*—

Bucky slams into the pervert with a lethal amount of force, grabbing the wrist of the hand that'd been undoing Peter's belt and snapping it, a clean break, feeling the bone beneath his metal fingers completely separate into two pieces.

Moving too fast for the man to even comprehend, Bucky releases his broken wrist, and instead, grabs him by the throat, slamming him into the side of the warehouse and squeezing his windpipe tight enough to muffle his screams of pain before they even have a chance to escape.

The man tries to gasp for air, tears of agony immediately leaking from his bloodshot eyes, and Bucky tightens his grip, almost crushing the man's throat in his metal hand, lifting him off the

ground until they're eyelevel.

"Listen to me, you piece of *shit,"* Bucky snarls, vehemently, leaning in close to the man, glaring out all of his raging, searing fury with his pale, cold eyes. "I just broke your wrist. If you ever, *ever,* in your *life,* touch him—or any other kid—*ever again,* then next time, it will be your *neck.*"

The man sputters, pawing at his unmovable metal arm with his uninjured hand, gasping and shaking in his grip. Bucky steps back and throws the man to the ground, letting him scream out loudly in pain as he tries to catch himself on his broken wrist.

Seething, Bucky briefly considers taking the rest of his anger out on the man, his arm still thrumming with the barely-contained desire to beat him to death, so powerful that Bucky's entire body is shaking, his shoulders quaking with the effort of holding his arms back, of keeping himself from killing someone in front of Peter.

*Peter—*

Before he can even turn around, Bucky feels a small, trembling hand cautiously brush against his metal one, and he looks down and sees Peter's soft, pale fingers wrapping around his larger silver ones, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze, even though Peter is shaking, too.

The violent energy vibrating in Bucky's arm is siphoned out of him like gasoline, evaporating into the air around them. Bucky looks up at Peter's shocked face, white as a sheet, and barely stops himself from pulling the kid into a bruising hug.

"Kid," he starts to say. "Are you all r—"

Peter surges forward, wrapping his arms around Bucky's middle and clinging to him, burying his face in his chest. Bucky hugs him back automatically, not even thinking about it, his own hands shaking until they can feel Peter—*unharmed, alive, I made it in time*—against their palms, holding him tightly against his chest.

He takes Peter by the shoulder and leads him out of the alleyway, out of the industrial complex, back to the main road and toward the direction of their apartment, his arm still around the kid's shoulders, hugging him to his side protectively, refusing to let go of him until their door is shut.

"Peter," he says, when the boy flops down bonelessly into the loveseat. He stands there awkwardly, hands clenching and unclenching into fists, not sure where to even begin when Peter looks up at him. "Listen, what happened wasn't… it wasn't your *fault,* but you need to be more careful. You can't just—just follow strangers around, whenever they ask you to. What if I'd gotten there too late? Why didn't you fight him off?"

Peter pulls his knees up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them, and looks down, ashamedly. "I… I didn't want to hurt him."

"He was *assaulting you,* kid," Bucky says, incredulously, sinking to the floor in front of Peter so they're closer to eyelevel. "You'll fight purse-snatchers and car thieves, but not someone who's trying to—to—"

"That's different!" Peter says, hugging himself tighter. "When I fight criminals, that's not *me,* that's Spider-Man! That guy, he—he said he'd seen me before, at Delmar's, and I was stupid and told him my name, and—if I fought him, and he realized I wasn't, y'know—realized I have superpowers, then what? I'm a mutant runaway foster kid! If the government found out about me, they'd ship me off to that air force base in Nevada, where they keep all the aliens and the

*mermaid!"*

"The—okay, hold on," Bucky says, gently grabbing Peter by the arms to thwart his frantic ranting. "First of all, kid, no one is going to take you anywhere. I'd never let that happen, okay?"

Genuine, unrepentant fear fills Peter's eyes at that, and he whispers, in a trembling, childlike voice, "You promise?"

Bucky takes the boy's head in his hands, keeping their gazes locked together. "Yeah, kid, I promise. I won't let anyone take you anywhere that you don't want to go. I said I'd take care of you, yeah? So listen to me."

He leans in slightly, speaking slowly and clearly to emphasize his words. "I don't *ever* want you to be scared of defending yourself, Peter. I'm not going to tell you not to help someone who asks for it—because you probably wouldn't listen, even if I did—but you can't hold back if someone attacks you. You have to protect yourself, too, you have a responsibility. And, listen, if there are consequences? Then we'll deal with them together. You aren't on your own anymore, Peter."

Peter gazes back at him, nodding once, a small, aborted movement that ends with tears rolling down his cheeks. Peter closes his eyes, lowering his face, and brokenly says, "I-I was… I was so…" he sobs, holding himself, sniffling as the tears come faster. "He tried to…"

"Shh, kiddo, hey," Bucky says, sitting beside him on the loveseat and letting Peter burrow against his chest, wrapping his arms around him tightly, his left hand carding through the boy's hair. "It's all right, you're all right. I've got you."

*He's all right. He is. I made it in time.*

Peter presses against his side and chest, hugging him back tightly, sniffling as his sobs and tears die down. "I left my backpack at Delmar's," he confesses quietly, voice slightly muffled.

Bucky sighs, rubbing his forehead. "And let me guess, it's full of homework you need to complete before tomorrow?"

"Uh huh."

"Well," Bucky says, giving the kid a couple reassuring pats on the back. "I guess we're getting sandwiches, after all."

When Bucky gets home from work, he immediately knows that something is wrong.

And that something *isn't* the fact that he's drenched down to the bone from the onslaught of rain; no, it's that when he opens the door and steps inside, dripping copious rainwater all over the floor, Peter isn't there—and there's no note on the counter, where he always leaves them when he goes out.

Bucky glances around the room, looking for signs that anything is misplaced as he changes out of his wet clothes, hanging them to dry on the bathtub's curtain rod. He snags his towel and begins patting himself down as he looks around, but everything looks the same, down to the microscopic detail. Peter's backpack isn't here, which means he never made it home from school, but today isn't a tutoring day, and the kid's never forgotten to tell him where he was going before.

But maybe there's a first time for everything; maybe he was just overwhelmed by all of his schoolwork and needed the internet as soon as possible, and rushed out without writing a note? Maybe he didn't want to get wet and is waiting out the rain somewhere, with no payphones nearby to call Bucky's cell? Or something happened, an accident or crime that needed Spider-Man's attention, and either way, he'll walk through that door any minute, wet and hungry and home safe?

Pacing, Bucky desperately tries to stomp down on the nagging thought of *maybe he won't.* This doesn't feel like the last time, when that creep lured Peter off the streets, no—this doesn't feel like impending dread; it's just the uncertainty of it, that's all. Bucky can't plan or coordinate a strategy when there's this much uncertainty, and that worries him.

Because Peter's fine. Of course he is. He's probably petting a dog somewhere, standing directly under the darkest raincloud and not caring one bit that his clothes are completely soaked through, because there's a dog happily wagging his tail at him. That's what it *always* is, whenever Peter's late; he got sidetracked with some kind of animal, and is off petting it someplace he shouldn't be.

Or maybe… he isn't. Maybe Peter isn't late on accident; maybe he's late on purpose. Maybe he realized, somehow, who—*what*—Bucky is, and took off? What if he figured it out? Maybe watching him nearly kill that pervert tipped him off, or else frightened him into finding another home, or even choosing to remain on the streets? If Peter found out about him—about Hydra, about where his arm came from, what he's done with it—is this what he would do? Just… disappear one day, with no notice?

Leaning against the back of the loveseat, Bucky stares at the window—not through it, because the newspapers are still taped over the glass—and listens to the heavy rain, his mind racing, switching back and forth between calm and panic, never staying on one long. When he can't sit still anymore, and can't stand waiting around, worrying, for even one more second, Bucky grabs a dry sweater and turns to the door, just as the sound of footsteps reaches his ears, and then the door is being pushed open, revealing a soaking wet, panting Peter, clutching a soaked cardboard box.

"Hi," Peter says between pants, smiling, something shy tinting his expression. He steps inside and shuts the door, water pouring off the box and dripping from the bottom of it, puddling beneath his drenched shoes as he stands awkwardly in front of the door. "So, uhm… don't be mad."

Bucky eyes the box suspiciously, before turning his gaze toward Peter, raising one eyebrow at him questioningly. "Well, that's a good sign."

Peter smiles, nervous, and slowly kneels down to place the box very gently on the floor. "Could you please hand me my towel?" he asks, and Bucky nods and goes to retrieve it for him.

"Thanks," Peter says, and to Bucky's surprise, he doesn't start drying himself off, no—he spreads the towel out on the floor, opens the box, reaches in and pulls out—

"Oh hell *no,* kid, no, no way."

"I don't wanna keep them!" Peter protests immediately, setting the tiny, shivering kitten down on the towel with exceptional care, then reaching back into the box.

"*Them?"*

"I found them in an alleyway," Peter says, and Bucky leans over and peers into the box, sees another three baby cats curled together on top of the soaking cardboard in a tiny, shivering pile. "I think with the rain and the traffic, I was the only one who could hear them crying. Somebody just dumped them in a box! There was a note that said, 'free to a good home,' but they're clearly not old

enough to be taken from their mom yet, and besides, their box was filling up with water! They would have drowned if I just left them!"

Bucky kneels down beside Peter, watches him move each kitten slowly onto the towel and gently rub them with the corners of it to try and dry them off.

"Kid, we can't have pets here," he says, regretfully, hating the way Peter's face tightens.

"I know," the boy says. "I promise I'm not trying to keep them—just until the rain stops! I ran around for a while trying to find the closest animal shelter, but they were soaked and cold and I was worried they'd get sick, and—just until the rain stops? Please? I'll take them to the closest shelter I can find!"

Bucky sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose to stifle the budding headache he can feel growing behind his eye sockets. "Just until the rain stops," he says firmly, giving Peter a pointed look. "And you're cleaning up after them if they make a mess."

"I will," Peter says, smiling, gently picking up the bundle of kittens in their towel and moving them into the living room.

"Dry off before you touch anything," Bucky says, grabbing one of his already-dirty shirts and using it to wipe up the puddle on the floor. Peter obeys, changing into dry clothes and hanging his wet ones next to Bucky's in the bathroom, before snatching the shoebox he'd been using as a pencil holder and emptying it into his backpack.

Peter sets the shoebox on the loveseat and gently places the kitten bundle into it, rearranging the towel so it's sufficiently filling the hard bottom of the box.

"Look at them," Peter coos, eyes practically twinkling with awe. "They're so *tiny.*"

"They are," Bucky agrees, coming over to glance into the box again, before flopping down tiredly on his mattress. "What do you want to have for dinner?"

"Wanna hold one?"

Bucky blinks, lifting his head slightly to look across the room at Peter, gently holding one of the kittens out to him in his palms. "Huh?"

"Come on, look at him, he's so cute!" Peter urges, grinning, trying to beckon Bucky back over with the little ball of fur. "Hold him, you know you want to!"

Bucky glances at the kitten. It looks small in Peter's hands, which means it would be even tinier in *his,* and that's just asking for trouble. Especially with his arm not functionally properly one-hundred-percent of the time… not to mention, they look so *fragile.* He has no business being anywhere near them.

"No, kid, I don't think so," Bucky says, sitting up on the mattress and scooting back to lean against the wall. "I'd hate to accidentally… It's just, it's not a good idea."

Peter's smile falters, his hands lowering slightly, like he's surprised that Bucky said no.

"You won't—it's okay!" he says, reassuringly, adjusting his grip on the kitten and holding it back out again. "You won't hurt him, I know you won't!"

Unintentionally, Bucky winces, hating the level of trust and *faith* in Peter's tone, his confidence in

him, in the idea that Bucky won't hurt things, when all he's done is hurt things his entire life.

"I can't," he says, closing his eyes to block out the sad look on Peter's face. He doesn't want to disappoint or upset the kid, but he's not the gentle, benevolent person Peter thinks he is. He doesn't want to harm anything, but that doesn't mean he won't do it, anyway. That's something Bucky knows very well.

He feels the mattress dip as Peter crawls onto it, but Bucky keeps his eyes closed, not minding if Peter cuddles up to him—at least he knows that Peter isn't mad.

He's a little surprised when the kid gently cups the back of his left hand, and completely shocked when something light and small and *moving* is placed in his open palm, weirdly warm against the cool metal.

Bucky's eyes shoot open and he looks down, anxious at the sight of the small, damp, black kitten squirming gently in his hand, quietly mewling. Peter holds the back of his hand in both of his, tightly, but gentle, also.

"See?" he says, looking up at Bucky's face, then back down at the kitten. "It's okay. You can touch him."

He can feel Peter's grip on his hand—the strength, keeping his fingers open, keeping his arm from malfunctioning, and Bucky hesitantly raises his right hand and brings it down beside the kitten, letting it nuzzle its face against his fingers with its unbelievably soft fur.

Holding his breath, Bucky gently runs the backs of his fingers down the kitten's spine, petting it, scared to apply too much pressure, but enthralled with the somehow—relaxing?—sensation of holding the small creature, of feeling it move and breathe in his hand, its tiny heart beating against his metal palm, sending the vibration all the way up into his body.

Bucky leans further down, looking closer, continuously stroking the kitten until it starts licking his fingers, trying to suckle on the ends of them. He pulls his hand back, letting Peter hold onto his fingers with one hand while he gently lifts the kitten with the other, taking it back over to the box.

The kittens all meow when Peter sets the fourth into the box, and he smiles down at them lovingly and starts petting them all with both hands, his expression so fond that it makes Bucky's chest clench. He wonders, idly, if that's the same face he makes when he looks at Peter.

He glances down at his left arm, at the familiar grooves and indentations in the metal, and realizes, dully, that that had been the first time—ever—that his left hand had held something, something alive and vulnerable, without the intention of hurting it. The hand that had taken all those lives, that'd been Hydra's weapon, a tool for evil, had just innocently held a living thing for the very first time.

Lost in his thoughts, Bucky doesn't notice Peter's return until the kid reaches out and gently touches his left hand again, grabbing his attention. Bucky looks up at him, analyzing his face, confused by the myriad emotions he finds there. Peter looks soft but determined; cautious, and yet somehow confident. There's affection in his eyes, but there's also apprehension—but most of all, Peter looks completely devoted.

"Let me look at it," he says, softly, squeezing Bucky's metal fingers for emphasis. "Let me help you. I can fix it."

Bucky searches his eyes, wary, but the unwavering faith he finds there—in himself and in Bucky

all at once—tramples down on the temptation to once again say no, to pull his hand back, to glove it so Peter can't even see it.

Instead, he lets Peter hold onto it, lets him turn it over, inspecting it, and with a deep breath he bites the bullet and says, "Okay."

Peter's face breaks into the widest, brightest grin Bucky's ever seen. He's up off the mattress in a flash, rummaging through his backpack to fetch his assortment of school project tools, and then rushing back over to him and settling down beside Bucky, like he's scared the man will change his mind if he takes too long.

He pulls off his sweater and lets Peter take his arm, lets him get his first real, close-up look at it, watching as wonder and excitement and admiration all cross over the kid's face. Peter turns his arm this way and that, figuring it out, looking for where to start, and Bucky lets him, lets him get close, lets him trace curious fingers over the red star.

He watches Peter work, observes the smooth motions of his hands as he examines Bucky's arm, as he uses each tool with expert precision, operating on his prosthetic like a surgeon, with the rapt expression of someone very different from the bubbly, clumsy teen Bucky knows. He sits still and quiet as he watches Peter fix his arm, the sound of rain hitting the balcony filling their apartment all evening long.

Chapter End Notes

I promise that Bucky is just as sad that Peter can't keep those kittens as you guys are.

Thanks for reading!! I'm sorry for the super long wait, you guys. I got hella busy these last few months.

# The Inevitable Goodbye

Chapter Notes

> Just want to give all of you a quick and sincere thank you for all the love you've shown this story so far. I can't even express how grateful and flattered I am by all your kind words. <3
>
> Thank you so much for everything, you guys!! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's well into late spring, on a warm, sunny afternoon when Bucky arrives home from work and finds Peter, sitting abeyant on the loveseat, waiting for him. He can tell the second his eyes land on the kid's face that something is up—his backpack, sitting prominently on the floor between his legs, seems jarringly out of place, almost religiously so.

Peter looks up at him when he enters and smiles, but there's tension there, around his eyes and mouth; a nervousness in his expression that makes him look different and strange. "Hi," he says, and his voice, at least, sounds as it always does—relieved. "Welcome home."

"Thanks," Bucky says, biting down on the impulse to immediately demand to know what's wrong. "Did school go okay?"

"Yeah," Peter replies, leaning forward slightly, overtop his bag. "It's just… this note."

"What note?" Bucky asks, moving in closer and watching as Peter unzips his bag, retrieving a folded, crumpled-looking sheet of paper. He hands it to Bucky somewhat hesitantly, his eyebrows furrowing.

"It's, uh... a permission slip."

Bucky takes it, opening it with a confused look in Peter's direction. "A what?"

"A permission slip," Peter says again, pointing to the address typed in bold letters at the top of the page. "We're supposed to go to the Smithsonian in DC at the end of the month. We need our—our parents to sign the forms, saying we can go."

Bucky's eyes dart over the page, hesitating on the line marked *Parent Signature.* He looks down at Peter's face, feeling dread and apprehension swell at the hopeful look in the boy's eyes.

"Kid…"

"Please? I changed homes so many times this year, they won't even think twice about it, I doubt they'll even look at it too closely! And if they do, they could just—just call you, right? And you could say you're my guardian and that it's okay if I go?"

"Peter," Bucky starts to protest, but the kid gives him the biggest, shiniest begging eyes Bucky has ever seen.

"*Please?* I really wanna go. I haven't been able to go on any high school field trips yet. Please? I'll

use my own money and everything!"

"I can't sign this," says Bucky, hating the words as they leave his mouth, hating the crushed look on Peter's face even more. Peter slumps his shoulders, as defeated as an extinguished fire.

"We can't—we shouldn't leave a paper trail of this, okay? It's too risky. It would be really bad if people found out you're living with me. You know that."

"But—" Peter starts, but Bucky cuts him off, sternly, putting his foot down.

"I'm not signing anything," he says, keeping his tone unapologetic, though he feels it radiating in his chest. "And that's final."

Peter looks wounded, lowering his head slightly as he gives a short nod. "Okay," he says, as miserably as Bucky feels. "I understand."

"Good," Bucky says, handing the form back to him, and then ruffling the boy's hair fondly. He wants to apologize; wants to tell Peter everything, tell him that every second they spend together is one second closer to being hunted down, that any connection linking them together is a bullet pointed at Peter's head, but he doesn't. He's not ready to tell Peter anything, not any of it—least of all how dangerous it is to stay with him, though he should have months ago, the moment he showed up on his porch.

Bucky's elbow-deep in the engine of a 1998 Toyota something-or-other, standing next to Frank in the garage behind his dealership, his shift nearly over, when his cellphone starts buzzing incessantly in his pocket. It's a crappy burner phone that doesn't have caller ID, so Bucky keeps his eyes on the bolt he's tightening as he puts the phone to his ear and answers it.

"Hello?"

"Hey," Peter says on the other line, amidst a sea of other voices and sounds; the chatter of kids filling a narrow hallway. "Uhm, I was wondering—can I go to a friend's house tonight?"

Bucky stops, his brows furrowing slightly. "Who?"

"Uh, my friend Ned? The one I've been telling you about? He's letting me use his phone. He, uh, he lives here in Midtown. He invited me to spend the night and hang out and stuff. Can I?"

A familiar tendril of uncertainty creeps its way up Bucky's back, to the nape of his neck. He purses his lips, grateful that Peter can't see the unsure expression on his face. "You can," he says, slowly, to make sure Peter is paying attention. "But I need his address and contact information. And you don't have anything with you to spend the night with, do you? No toothbrush or change of clothes?"

"Yeah," Peter agrees.

"Okay. So, you can spend the night, but I want you to head home first. Grab what you need, and leave me a note so I'll know where you'll be and how to get a hold of you. Sound fair?"

"Yeah," Peter says, and Bucky can hear the warm smile in his voice, the thinly-veiled excitement. "Thanks. I'll, uhm, I'll see you tomorrow, I guess?"

“Yeah,” he says, keeping his tone even. “Have a good night, kid. Be good.”

“I will,” replies Peter, softly. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

Bucky hangs up, gazing at his phone for a moment before he pockets it. This will be the first time in—God, how many weeks—months—has it been since Peter came to live with him? The last of the snow was just melting, that night they met, and now the days are long and bright and getting hotter with each passing one. And this will be the first time in however-long-ago-that-was that Peter won’t be there when Bucky gets home; that he’ll have gone an entire day and night without seeing the kid.

Next to him, Frank shifts his weight as he clears his throat, and when Bucky glances up at him from under the brim of his hat, the man is eyeing him, calculatingly. “Who was that?”

“My, uh,” Bucky hesitates, mind going blank. Shit. What the hell is he supposed to say? *Oh, nobody, just a runaway foster kid I’ve been secretly and illegally taking care of, not to mention endangering, since I’m technically on the run.* There’s no semblance of the truth that Bucky could tell Frank that wouldn’t raise questions or alarms in the man’s mind, so Bucky says the next best thing, the most believable lie he has. “That was my kid.”

Frank looks surprised, his dark eyes widening until Bucky can see every speck of copper in his irises. “Shit, Barnes. I had no idea you were a father.”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, swallowing thickly. “Just got the one.”

“How old? Boy? Girl?”

“Boy.” He keeps his head down, but not to hide his shame—he isn’t worried about Frank seeing the lie on his face, he’s worried he’ll see the *pride;* the inexplicable burst of admiration he feels at telling someone about Peter for the very first time. “He’ll be fifteen next month.”

Frank grunts, returning to his task of refurbishing the interior seats with a slight nod of his head. “Tough age. You had ‘em young.”

“Yeah,” says Bucky, ducking his head behind the car’s hood. “But he’s a good kid. He’s amazing. He’s wicked smart—an honor student, actually. And he stays out of trouble. He’s nothing like me.”

“Hell,” Frank says, leaning over and giving Bucky a one-eyebrow-raised look. “That’s the first time in the three months you been here that I’ve seen you smile, Barnes.”

Though a part of him tries not to, the rest of Bucky breaks out in an honest, wide grin, brimming with pride.

“I’m lucky to have him,” he says.

The conversation fades, and eventually, Frank leaves him to his work and returns to tend the dealership. The rest of Bucky’s afternoon goes by smoothly, but as he makes his way home, an odd sense of misplacement takes over him. It’s a terrifying thought; the realization that, though he spent a year living in his apartment alone, knowing that Peter isn’t going to be there has stopped it from feeling like home.

But the closer he gets to the apartment, the more that lost feeling twists and changes into something worse, something darker. By the time his building comes into sight, Bucky feels almost

sick, weighed down with dread and an ominous foreboding that coils in his stomach like an oily serpent. It lasts all the way until he pushes his door open, and then Bucky knows exactly what's wrong, as soon as he sees it.

The standalone counter dividing the kitchen and the rest of the studio is bare, save for his journal, opened to the newest page with a pen resting on top of it. Bucky's stomach drops at the sight.

His journal.

Heart pounding, Bucky moves forward until he's resting his hands on the counter, as if needing to see it up close to confirm his suspicions. The page has a name, an address and a phone number written on it—*Ned Leeds*—in Peter's usual messy print, and there's nothing off about it, nothing of note, and yet Bucky feels sick at the sight.

Peter has no way of knowing just how sensitive the information inside of this journal is. He probably only ever saw Bucky use it as an address book, a list of contacts. He doesn't know that the first hundred pages were all dedicated to him; to figuring out who Bucky Barnes is, mapping together the scattered remnants of his past self.

But he must know it, now.

He doesn't know if it's just the anxiety; the swirling, insidious idea that one day, Peter would find out everything about him, would learn this terrible thing that Bucky wants so badly to protect him from, but Bucky can feel his heartbeat hammering inside his chest. Peter knows. He knows Peter knows—he can feel it, deep within the chasm of his torso. Peter knows about Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes. He knows about the Howling Commandos. The first half of this journal is just scrawls and scraps of memory in fragments; pieces of events as they came to him, hastily scribbled down in the middle of the night before he lost them. Memories of the war and of Steve and of Brooklyn and his entire life before the fall. And on some pages, just the word *hydra* written over and over again, carved into the paper viciously when all Bucky could do was sit and seethe and grit his teeth at the memories that tried to consume him, but he never wrote them down, never gave them tangible form, and for that, Bucky has never been more grateful in his entire life.

Peter might know about James Buchanan Barnes.

But he doesn't know about the Winter Soldier.

But still. He has to—he has to make sure Peter is all right; has to quell this roiling anxiety in his chest. He knows this raging storm inside him won't die down until he hears Peter's voice, until he knows the boy is all right. He pulls out his cellphone and dials the number Peter scribbled on the page.

An unsure, adolescent voice answers on the second ring. "Hello?"

"This Ned Leeds?"

"Uhm, yeah."

Bucky doesn't bother sweetening the tone of his voice, though he can tell the kid is a little unnerved by his gruff baritone. "I'm looking for Peter," he says.

"Oh!" the kid exclaims, nervousness instantly gone, to Bucky's confusion. "You must be Peter's dad! He said he'd be giving you my number."

"Uh," Bucky blinks, taken aback. "Yeah. He there?"

Now Ned's the one who sounds confused. "Uh, no, he—he said something came up? He said he'd be over later."

Bucky's fist clenches, the metal clanking as it knocks together. His stomach drops in the wake of the anxiety rearing its ugly head once more. "Did he say where he was going?"

"Uhm, no, sorry," says Ned in a somewhat slow drawl.

Frowning, Bucky sternly says, "When he shows up, tell him to call me," and then goes to hang up, his thumb stilling over the button for half a second as Ned happily calls out, "Okay, I will. Bye Peter's dad!"

Bucky hesitates, then hangs up with more vitriol than really necessary, his stomach flipping at the strange mix of emotions coursing through him.

He has to find Peter.

He turns, searching the room desperately for any hint or clue where Peter would have disappeared to. He finds nothing, so he breaks for the door and leaves the apartment behind without a second thought, making for the closest spot where he thinks Peter might be; the nearest neighbor with a dog.

Peter isn't loitering outside the neighbor's fenced yard, or hanging over the side of any of the other ones nearby. He isn't at Delmar's, pestering the cat or talking the old man's ear off. He isn't at the park, or running the trails that serpentine behind the freeway, and he isn't swinging through buildings by his webs, brazenly obstructing criminal activity in the early afternoon rush.

Bucky heads back to the apartment when his search brings up nothing, but Peter still isn't there, and there's no sign that he has been since Bucky first came home. Bucky slumps, tired, defeated, his mind going numb even as his body rages like a hurricane internally, worry and fear and anxiety all festering together in the hungry pit of his stomach. Ned still hasn't called him, there's no sign of Peter anywhere, and he's out of ideas of where the boy could have gone.

He hangs his head in his hands as he sits on the couch, the emotional turmoil almost turning to numbness as exhaustion sets in. What if this is it? This day that he knew, from the first moment he let Peter into his house, was a long time coming? What if this is the day he has to say goodbye to Peter Parker?

For comfort more than anything, Bucky lifts his head and glances around at Peter's belongings—the bag of clothes (that Bucky made him fold), the books, the DVD cases—the pile of loose pieces of paper, old homework and notes and tests marked with bright red "100%"s on them—the Spanish test Bucky helped him study for, speaking to him in Spanish the whole evening as they made and ate dinner and the training after, remembering Peter's wide, bright grin a few days later as he bounded through the door and lifted the test for Bucky to see, so proud of that 100%. How proud Bucky had been of him that day, how his chest felt warm and light in the presence of that smile.

Bucky lifts the test from the stack—wanting to believe, more than anything, that Peter will forgive him for the lies, or at least give him the chance to explain before he decides to leave—when he sees it, below the Spanish test among the stack of papers, the sheet with a big, bold *Smithsonian Institution* printed on it.

His hand stills, and then he reaches for the paper and lifts it up.

It's the permission slip.

Bucky reads it again, once, twice, then a third time, before he feels his chest tighten once more, and he sits back on the loveseat and lets the form rest limply in his lap. Peter kept it, even though Bucky refused to sign it—*couldn't* sign it, even though he wanted to. And he did. *Does.* He wants nothing more than for Peter to have this; a home with someone who can give him things like this, opportunities, experiences, things that Bucky is too afraid to take part in, knowing that he is willingly endangering this kid's life more and more every single day.

And even still, Peter kept it, as if throwing away that opportunity had been too difficult, even though Bucky had blatantly refused it to him.

A coldness seeps through him then as he realizes where Peter has gone. Peter would want to see it with his own eyes. He would want to know; would want to confirm the things he read in Bucky's journal for himself. Bucky stands, phone and keys in hand as he exits the apartment. He heads straight for the bus stop, but even as he walks, doubt fills him.

Maybe this—this inevitable goodbye—maybe it's a blessing in disguise. Maybe this is a chance for Peter to find a real home. A real family. Someone who could actually *adopt* him, who could sign permission slips for him, could give him all the things Bucky can't.

Maybe this is the sign that it's time for Bucky to let Peter go.

Even with that thought plaguing him, Bucky continues moving. He catches the long bus to DC, to the Smithsonian—watches the sun dip lower and lower as he continues searching the crowds for Peter, seeking him out amongst the horde of pedestrians in the street, filing in and out of the museum in long, wide lines.

Bucky searches every room and hallway open to the public three times. He loops back around to the Howling Commandos display over and over again, hardly even sparing his own exhibit a glance as he scans benches and counts heads looking for Peter.

But there's no sign of him here, either.

Defeated, Bucky makes his way out of the institution, fully intending on calling Ned one more time and trying to find a bus back to New York when, by chance, he glances across the street and sees a sign.

It derails his attempt at giving up, and Bucky spins on his heel and jogs across the road, dodging a honking car dismissively as he keeps his eyes fixed on the sign. Below it, a walking trail leads from the sidewalk into a park, and Bucky heads down it unhesitatingly, some strange, magnetic pull guiding him through the trees, his anxiety calmed for the first time in hours.

The trail curls around and leads to a wide, open park, benches lined along the perimeter of a long field, filled with people playing fetch with their dogs. Bucky sees him as soon as he steps off the trail.

There's a bench several yards ahead of him, just off the side of the path, bathed in the same orange light that covers the whole park as the sun sets. Bucky watches Peter, sitting sullenly on the bench, his face in profile, gazing down at a panting dog that seems to be contentedly keeping him company, absentmindedly petting the dog's head as he stares down at the grass, his eyes dim and downcast as he sits, lost in thought.

The sight of Peter—sitting there, having come to DC all alone to find the truth, only to have ended up here in this roadside park by himself, sitting and watching the dogs play, undoubtedly petting as many as he can, while the thoughts eat at him, while sunlight beams through the canopy and paints

him in the reds and yellows of sunset—it strikes Bucky deeply; a basic and very instinctual need to *protect* this kid, at all costs, Hydra be damned, Steve Rogers and the Avengers be damned. The sight of his kid alone on that bench hits Bucky and fills him with so much *love* that all earlier thoughts of not being good enough for Peter are drowned out. He knows he isn't good enough. Peter deserves everything and Bucky can't give him more than what's at his table, but he'll raze this whole world to the ground before he lets anyone ever hurt this boy.

Bucky approaches slowly, and the dog jumps up and runs off as its master calls it away. Peter looks up as he watches it go, and then his eyes land on Bucky, and he sits up straighter and blinks owlishly up at him as the man approaches. Bucky gets close enough that he can clearly see the gold of the sunset reflecting in those large, dark eyes, and then he stops.

"Peter," he says, practically a sigh, not bothering to hide the relief in his voice in the slightest.

"Bucky!" Peter says, bewildered. "How did you—why are you—what are you *doing* here?"

"I came to find you," he says, though part of him wants to scream, *I've been looking for you everywhere.* "I called Ned."

Peter sinks further into the bench, his shoulders hunching, sheepishly. "I'm sorry," he says, eyes downcast. "I didn't—I was going to go to Ned's, I just… I needed to come here first, is all. How did you, uh, how did you know where I was?"

Bucky frowns, clenching his metal fist as he debates what to tell him, but he doesn't even know where to begin.

"I found the permission slip," he says.

Peter's cheeks redden slightly, though Bucky can't fathom why he would be embarrassed. Peter looks up at him shyly, then back down to his lap and says, "Yeah. I, uhm—I'm sort of bummed I can't go on the field trip, so, I, uh, I thought, hey, it's Friday night, I could just go now and… wa—wait, but, uhh, how did you know I was *here?"*

He gestures at the park around them, and Bucky almost wants to smile as he says, "I saw the 'Dogs Allowed' sign at the park entrance from across the street and knew that, if you'd seen it too, then you would be here."

Peter smiles, warm and somewhat flattered, before something more serious flashes across his face and he ducks his head again. Bucky sighs, stepping forward and taking a seat beside the kid on the bench, watching the park steadily empty as the sun finishes setting.

"Kid," he says quietly, after a long moment. "I know why you came here."

"W-what, uh, what do you mean?"

"Cut the crap," Bucky says, not unkindly, leaning back to rest his metal arm on the back of the bench, turning so that he's half-facing Peter. "You know what I mean. I know you came here for the Howling Commandos exhibit. I know you read my journal."

Peter's head snaps up, turning to Bucky with wide, panicked eyes, his skin paling even more with the sun now hidden completely beyond the horizon. Bucky can see the slight tremble in the kid's legs, and then Peter frantically says, "I'm sorry, Bucky, I—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I *swear,* it—it was an accident, I just thought it was an address book, I didn't mean to see anything, but then—th-then I saw that photo of you and—and I wanted to just ask you, and I should have, but then I thought, what if I'm just being stupid and suspicious and—but that photo was of *you* and I couldn't

understand, I still don't understand how you're—but—please don't be mad, please, Bucky, *please* don't be mad!"

"I'm not mad," Bucky says, but the panicked look in Peter's eyes doesn't fade, so Bucky reiterates, "Hey, kid, I mean it, I'm not mad. I just…" he sighs, feeling his shoulders sag slightly at the realization that he doesn't know what to say. "Here's the thing. If you're going to stay with me—"

He feels the boy's body stiffen like he's been turned to stone, and when he glances over at Peter and sees the wetness pooling in his eyes, Bucky stops short, confused by the small, trembling sound of Peter begging, "Please, Bucky, I—*please*—" And then the next thing he knows, Peter's whole body is wracked with trembles and the tears are streaming from his eyes. "I won't do it again, I promise, I promise I won't do it again, please—"

Bucky almost can't understand him through his heaving sobs, and then Peter looks back up at him with his wide, dark, wet eyes, and Bucky's heart drops into his stomach, as heavy and cold as if it was turned to stone when Peter says, "Please don't leave me! Please, please don't, I'll be good, I *promise,* so please don't leave me, Bucky, I want to stay with you!"

"Hey," Bucky tries, panic in his own voice, though Peter doesn't stop crying until Bucky takes him by the shoulders and shushes him gently. "Hey, hey, kid, calm down, shh, it's all right, I didn't mean it like that, hey." He takes Peter's head in his hands and shushes him again, and then says, once the boy's sobs have died down a little, "I'm not leavin' you, kid. What I meant was… if you're going to *choose* to stay with me. And I only mention that because—look, here's the thing, Peter…"

Bucky sighs, letting the kid go and leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, wearily. He resists the urge to duck his head, exhaustion and unease filling him.

"I owe you an explanation. I know I do. But here's the thing, Peter, I…"

His jaw clenches, and Bucky wrings his hands together and does lower his head now, bracing himself, so terrified of saying what he knows needs to be said. What he should have said months ago.

"It's not safe with me."

Peter goes rigid again beside him, and Bucky can see the boy's hands and knees start to shake, no doubt on the cusp of begging him again, so Bucky continues, before he gets the chance, "I'm being hunted, Peter."

He can feel the kid's eyes boring into the side of his head, and Bucky has to try very hard to resist the urge to turn and meet his gaze. He clasps his hands together to keep himself from gripping the wooden bench too tightly and says, "I'm just going to be honest with you here, kid. There are some really bad people after me. There's a reason I live the way I do, and it's not just because I was born in 1917. I'm on the run."

He does turn to look at Peter now, and stares straight into his eyes as he continues, his voice deceptively calm in contrast with the anxiety coiled in his gut, "Every minute you spend with me, you're in danger—"

"I don't care about that—"

"Let me finish," Bucky urges, and Peter quiets down, his face twisted with worry. "There's no 'if' about whether or not they find me. It's a 'when.' And that 'when' is going to end in a fight… to the

death. You're in danger just *knowing* me, let alone *living* with me, kid. And if I tell you everything about where I was for that seventy years—I can't. I can't do that, Peter. I'm already putting you at too much of a risk. If they find out you know, they'll go out of their way to take you out. I can't let that happen."

He looks back down at his hands, feels the hard, solid metal of his left fist cradled within his right beneath his glove, squeezing the palm, still half-expecting to feel the blood coursing through it, even now.

"If I was a better a man…" he starts, swallowing thickly, clenching his hands. "If I was a better man, I *would* send you away. Before they find us. I'd take you somewhere you could have the life you deserve, and then disappear as far away from you as I could get."

Bucky hazards a glance at him, sees the tears running copiously down his cheeks once more, and sighs, continuing, "But I said I'd take care of you," he turns to face the boy, laying a hand on his shoulder, comfortingly, "and I'm gonna. Honestly, kid, I'm in this too deep now. I'd never get another good night's sleep if I didn't have a way of knowing you were okay. And I can't shoulder that."

He moves his hand from Peter's shoulder up to his face, cupping the back of his head, making sure Peter is looking up at him through his still-crying eyes. "So until you decide you want otherwise, you're staying right here with me, kid. I'm not leavin' you, even though I should, and I can't tell you the truth, even though you deserve to know it."

Peter brings his hands up, starts wiping his cheeks off and catching the tears that keep falling from his eyes with the backside of his fists. He breathes in deeply, trying to get himself under control, his sobs dying down.

"I'm sorry," he says again, mournfully. "It's just—I'm always thinking that I'm gonna lose this someday. This—us. I'm so—" he sobs again, curling forward slightly as the words leave him, "I'm so scared all the time that something's gonna take this away. That you're gonna—you're gonna leave, or… that… I'll lose you, too."

He looks up at Bucky, and Bucky feels a sharp, painful stab of guilt and heartache at the genuinely terrified look on the boy's face.

"After my aunt and uncle died…" Peter almost-whispers, a little calmer now, "I kept… I kept wishing someone would… help me. I know that sounds dumb, 'cause I have these powers and everything, and I know I'm old enough to take care of myself, but I just… I was so scared, and I felt so alone. And then every place they sent me was—I… I just started feeling unsafe all the time. I felt like I was going crazy from how scared I constantly was."

Peter stops trying to wipe away his tears, falling too fast for his hands to keep up with.

"And then… then I met you. And you *did* help me. You actually—you cared, and you were there for me, and I—I latched on, 'cause for the first time in *so long* I didn't feel scared anymore, and now we live together and I get to feel like that all the time, but—I'm also so *panicked,* I feel like the rug is going to be pulled out from under my feet. I feel like I'm going to wake up one morning and I'll be back in foster care, getting thrown around or starved or just completely ignored, and… and you… won't be there."

Bucky wants to reach out, wants to say, *That will never happen, I won't let that happen,* but doubt stops him, foaming up like an impenetrable wall between them. He can't predict the future; can't stop things that are out of his control, but in this moment, the temptation to say whatever he has to

to make Peter stop crying is almost unbearable.

"When I opened your journal—when I saw that photo of you, from the war, and read that stuff you wrote, I—I thought, this is it, this is the rug being pulled out. I finally found a home and now I have to lose it again, because he's going to Romania and that'll be it, he'll be gone and I'll be alone, and I *hate* that I'm so scared of being alone, but more than that, Bucky, I… want… to stay with you. I wanna stay with *you*, in our home, making dinners and watching movies and training and going to Delmar's, and walking Dodger and Tessa on the weekends and going to Laundry Land and talking in Spanish. I love that, I love all of it, I love living with you and being a family and I'm *scared*."

He drops his face into his hands, his small, narrow shoulders heaving as he sobs into them. Bucky reaches out, is about to lay his hand on the boy's shoulder again and pull him into a hug when Peter cries, "Please don't leave me, please, Bucky, don't… I don't wanna lose you!"

He pulls Peter forward with both hands, wrapped securely around the boy's back, and holds him tightly against his chest as Peter sobs into his jacket. Bucky embraces him, practically pulling him into his lap as he ducks his face against the top of Peter's head and adamantly assures into his hair, "I won't, Peter, I'm not, I'm not leavin' you. I promise I'm not."

Bucky holds him firmly, subtle rocking him in a gentle, back-and-forth motion as the kid gradually quiets, devolving from gut-wrenching sobs to softer ones, interrupted by hiccups and sniffles as he tries to take deep breaths through the onslaught of tears.

"Hey," Bucky says quietly, once Peter has settled down enough to hear him. "Listen, Peter, I meant when I said that you're sticking with me for as long as you want to. And if… *when* the time comes that I have to leave New York… you can come with me. I want you to. But I know that that's a lot. It's not exactly a fair trade, I get that. But I'm not going to leave you behind unless you want me to, okay? We're in this together, like you said. Family."

Peter hugs him tighter, and Bucky rests his cheek a little more fully against the boy's hair. "I won't lie and say things are going to stay like this forever. I wish they could, but I know that, eventually, I'll have to keep moving. It doesn't have to be Romania. We can go somewhere else—maybe Argentina. Somewhere they speak Spanish, so you could still get around on your own. Somewhere densely populated where we could lay low and start over. We'll figure it out."

"What about—" Peter says, but it's muffled against Bucky's chest, so he leans back slightly and tries again. "What about the Avengers? Captain America is—he's your friend, right? Can't they help us?"

Bucky tenses, unsure of what to say in response to that, Peter's big, dark eyes gazing questioningly up at him. He swallows, then clears his throat to try and quell the unease that seems to be boiling over, like a volcano shooting lava up into his mouth.

"It's not that simple," he tries, furrowing Peter's brows even further. "Listen, kid, the guy you read about in that museum, the one that used to be Steve's friend… that ain't really me. I mean, it *is,* but I'm not—shit. What I mean is, Steve and I aren't what you think we are, and the last time we saw each other, it wasn't… We aren't friends. Worse than that, I'm pretty sure he'd lock me up if he ever found me. I can't ask for his help."

Peter frowns, worry and confusion all mixing together on his face as he asks, "Why would Captain America want to lock you up?"

Bucky sighs, hugging Peter back against his chest so he doesn't have to look at those wide,

pleading eyes or feel like he's lying straight to the kid's face. "It's one of those things I can't tell you," he says, apologetically.

Peter's quiet for a moment, then sniffles one last time, wipes his face on the sleeve of his hoodie and says, "Okay," with a small nod against Bucky's chest.

The tension leaves Bucky instantly, and he sags into the bench, his arms loosening around Peter before he tightens them again, worried for a split-second that he'll let the boy fall. The boy snuggles in, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath as the tension seems to leave him, too.

Then Peter sighs and says, in a quiet, sleepy mumble, "I'm hungry."

Bucky smiles, leaning his head back and staring up at the black night sky. "Yeah, me too, kid. It's late."

"I was s'pposed to go to Ned's," he whines, going even limper in Bucky's arms, as if on purpose. "But I'm so *tired.*"

"It'll take us most of the night to get home anyway," says Bucky, sitting Peter up and then straightening himself out, stretching his back as he stands from the bench. "Use my phone and call him, see if you can't go over tomorrow night. Speaking of, instead of take-out this week, I'm buying you a burner phone. No more of this hide-and-seek crap, kid. I'm too old."

"Sorry," Peter says again, with a shy smile. "I didn't mean to worry you. I didn't think you'd find out at first, but then… when I was sitting here, all I could think about doing was going home. I hadn't decided whether or not I was going to come clean and ask you, or if I just wanted to see you and take advantage of everything while I still had it when you showed up."

Bucky wants to say, *You don't have to take advantage of anything. I'm not going anywhere,* wants desperately, more than anything, to reassure him and do everything—say anything—to make him feel safe and secure, but he knows better. He knows that there are very few things in life that he can actually control; that even if he and Peter had been completely normal people, brought together by the simplest, healthiest circumstances possible, there are some things in life that aren't certain, promises that can't be kept.

But Bucky swears on every fiber of his being that this will be the one thing that isn't taken away from him.

"Going home sounds like a great idea, kid," he says, ruffling Peter's hair and then taking him by the shoulder and steering him out of the park. "Let's grab some food and hope we don't miss the last bus. If we do, I'm making you jog back to Queens."

Peter laughs, slinging his arm around Bucky's waist in a side-hug. "That would take, like, three days."

"You'll be grateful for all the training we've been doing, that's for sure."

Bucky smiles as Peter laughs again, and ruffles the kid's hair affectionately one more time, giving his shoulder a comforting squeeze, feeling the small, warm, breathing body against his side and reveling in it, this assembly of bones and blood that has all come together, culminating into this thing that Bucky loves with all his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Hope this one was worth the wait.

I feel super bad posting this slightly-angsty chapter in the wake of IW, but... If it makes you feel better, the next few chaps are going to be super fluffy??

Thank you again!! <3

# Hero

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The trip back to Queens is done mostly in silence, Peter becoming quieter and quieter the later it gets, growing tired and more sluggish after the long day he's had and the emotional conversation that came after.

The kid dozes on the bus ride home, falling asleep against Bucky's side while protectively clutching his backpack. Bucky lets him, lets him take a quick nap to recharge and get back some of his energy, but wakes him when they're halfway home, before he can completely ruin his sleep schedule. Or his neck, for that matter.

"Kid," Bucky repeats, jostling Peter a little harder. "Peter, come on. If I let you sleep anymore, you'll be up all damn night."

"Hmmuhhh," Peter groans unintelligibly, trying to burrow his face in Bucky's side, but the man sighs and plucks him off his jacket like an aggressively-clingy chimpanzee.

"Nooo," Peter whines, collapsing pitifully in his own seat. "I don't wanna, I'm *tired.*"

"You'll be up at 4 A.M. if I let you sleep any longer," says Bucky, not letting the amusement he feels tinge his voice, doing his best to sound stern with Peter giving him that exaggerated puppy-eyed look.

"Ten more minutes?" he begs.

"No."

"Five more minutes?"

"*No.*"

"One more minute!"

"Why don't you tell me how school was?" Bucky says instead, knowing that the best way to wake Peter up is to get him talking. "Did you get your English review back yet?"

Realizing that this is one battle he won't win, Peter sighs and straightens up in his seat. "Yeah. I did okay on the essay part, but Mrs. Bernstein gave me another entire booklet of multiple choice questions to practice for the final. That's what me and Ned were originally gonna do at his place."

Bucky nods, recognizing the slight change in Peter's tone that means he's found something the boy is excited to talk about. "What else did you guys have planned?"

That does the trick, and Peter livens up as he sets off on a long-winded rant about all the things he and Ned have in common, the things they've talked about doing, how excited he is to see his new friend's place and "geek out" over his supposedly impressive collection of electronics.

Peter brightens up enough to keep talking through the rest of the bus ride, managing to stay awake until they make it back to Queens. But he quickly grows tired again as they begin walking back to their apartment from the bus station, and Bucky has to slow his pace so the boy can keep up with

him, Peter getting quieter and quieter until he stops talking altogether.

“Almost home, Pete,” Bucky says, wrapping his arm around the kid’s shoulders. “Come on, keep talking. You said this Liz girl was peeved you turned down joining the Decathlon?”

“Not really peeved,” Peter mumbles sleepily, teetering as part of him seems inclined to lean further into Bucky’s side, seeking warmth. “I think she was mostly disappointed. But Ned says he’ll join if I do.”

Bucky’s hand tightens on Peter’s shoulder blade. He hates that the boy can’t have everything his heart desires, that they don’t have the money for Peter to join as many clubs as he’d like—that Bucky wouldn’t be able to sign his approval, even if they did. Peter is so deserving of all those things, and it eats away at Bucky to know that he can’t provide them, that his best will never be close to what Peter should have.

To know that Peter is about to ask him if he can join the Decathlon, and Bucky will have to tell him no, *again.*

“Bucky?”

Bucky lets his arm slip off of Peter’s shoulder, quietly sighing. “Yeah?”

“What’s Captain America like?”

Surprised, Bucky raises an eyebrow down at him, taken aback. “What?”

Peter glances up, meets his gaze, his expression eager and awake and starry-eyed. “I mean, is he—y’know, is he really… Captain-y? Like, all serious and bossy and stuff? Or is that just when he’s out on missions? Is he bigger in person?”

“We’re about the same size,” Bucky says, glancing around them anxiously, making sure no one is close enough to hear. “Why?”

“Oh, uh,” Peter says, blushing slightly. “No—no reason, I just, uhm, I was just wondering. Since he’s, you know… Sorry. I thought that—since it’s not really about your past and all—I thought you wouldn’t mind. Sorry.”

Bucky sighs, lowering his gaze to the sidewalk as he feels Peter deflate beside him. “I don’t mind,” he says tentatively, feeling guilty. “He’s actually… a lot like you.”

Peter perks up, surprised and intrigued in equal measure. “*What?”* he exclaims, eyes wide. “Like *me?* How?”

Smiling, Bucky gives his head a small shake as a chuckle rises in his throat. “A good sense of right and wrong, and a crappy sense of self-preservation.”

“Do you miss him?”

Bucky almost stumbles, shooting Peter a quick look to see the boy gazing up at him, curiously, but with something warm and sympathetic coloring his expression.

“You guys were best friends, right?” Peter asks, quietly. “Even if you had a fight, or… whatever happened, it still must be hard not being friends anymore, right?”

Fists clenching, Bucky turns away from Peter, stares straight ahead as they walk, trying desperately

to keep his face neutral. “Yeah,” he says, voice layered with more emotion than he’d like. “I’ve had to get used to a lot of difficult things in this century, but…” he swallows, his throat feeling like it’s closing up. “Being without Steve has easily been the hardest.”

Their lives begin to feel both much calmer and way more hectic at the same time as late spring turns to early summer. Peter only has a few more weeks until summer vacation, and spends most of his free time studying to prepare for finals, when he’s not patrolling the streets or being dragged into a training session.

Bucky is hard at work at the dealership, and also at trying to solve his latest and most daunting dilemma: Peter’s birthday. With the boy’s fifteenth only days away, Bucky still has no idea what to do—or if he’s even within his rights to do anything. He doesn’t even know if Peter *wants* to celebrate it, let alone how they should.

But he’s been working overtime while Peter puts in extra hours tutoring at school, and the money he’s saved up from doing so sits secretly under the floorboards in their apartment, waiting for Bucky to make up his mind.

“Well, what does he like to do?” Frank asks him, in response to Bucky openly lamenting about being shitty at picking out gifts. “Get him something you know he likes, and he’ll be more touched to learn that you pay attention to him than by how much money you spent. Kids are sentimental like that.”

Bucky’s hand stills on the wrench he’s holding, halfway through tightening a bolt. Frank is right. He hasn’t even *met* Peter, and yet he just gave Bucky the perfect idea of what to do.

It’s the middle of the evening by the time Bucky leaves work, and he makes several stops on the way home, picking up everything he needs for the plan. When he’s a few blocks from their apartment, Bucky pulls out his cellphone and dials Peter’s number.

“Hello?” the boy answers on the second ring.

“Hey,” Bucky says, a smile rising to his face at the sound of Peter’s voice. “You at home?”

“Um, yeah,” Peter says, a little distractedly. No doubt with his head still shoved in a textbook. “What’s up?”

“You’ve been at school all day,” Bucky says, glancing up at the park sign next to him. “And probably studying since you got home, knowing you. You should take a break. I’m on my way home, come meet me at the park.”

“Uhh, okay. The one on 2nd?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, already moving to leave the park entirely. “Ten minutes?”

“Okay,” Peter says again, a little more cheerfully. “See you soon!”

“See you soon,” Bucky says, then hangs up and darts across the street to the other side, heading back to the apartment the long way, the way he knows Peter won’t be heading.

He feels slightly guilty about misleading the kid, but there’s no way he’ll be able to stash his purchases in the apartment without the kid seeing him if he’s at home. Bucky hefts his bag through

the front door and makes quick work of lifting the loosened planks of wood that cover the kitchen, revealing his bugout bag, his savings, his old journals, and his gun.

Bucky carefully lays his items amongst his other hidden sundries and closes the floor back up, before quickly and purposefully exiting the apartment. He takes a shortcut back to the park, and stops at an ice cream stand by the fountain in the middle before heading to the bench where he knows Peter will be waiting.

Peter sees him almost immediately from down the path, and jumps up from the bench, eyes wide and smile wider, bounding up to him, so happy to see him, like always.

"There you are!"

"Sorry," Bucky says, grinning, handing Peter a cone. "There was a line."

"It's okay," Peter assures, taking the ice cream from him eagerly. "Thanks, this is awesome. What's the occasion?"

"The occasion is we've both been working hard, and if you stick your head any further into one of your textbooks, I'm going to lose you in there."

"Ha ha," Peter says, trying—and failing—to look unamused, his smile widening even more as he gratefully takes a lick of his ice cream. "This is great," he says, with a sincere, appreciative look that he gives to both Bucky and the cone in his hand. "I've missed doing stuff like this lately."

"Yeah," Bucky agrees, taking Peter by the shoulder and leading him back over to the bench. "Me too, kid. And speaking of, I wanted to talk to you about Saturday."

"Oh, uhh," Peter glances back up at him. "Because—because it's my birthday?" he asks.

"No, actually, the rodeo is in town and I think you should audition." Bucky eyes him, smirking at the flat, unimpressed look on the boy's face. "*Yes,* because it's your birthday."

"We don't have to do anything," Peter says quickly, in a somewhat bashful tone. "Ned invited me to spend the night if I don't have other plans."

"I was thinking we could go somewhere," Bucky says, pleased by the excited glint Peter gets in his eyes. "You can invite Ned. We can go to that planetarium you said you wanted to see, and then I thought of taking you to Coney Island."

Peter's whole face lights up, his brown eyes shining, his back straightening like he can barely contain himself. "I've never been able to do Coney Island!"

"What?" Bucky asks, confused. "What do you mean?"

Peter gestures down at himself, face reddening. "Before I was, y'know… before I 'changed,' I was always really, uh, wimpy, I guess. I was pretty frail and weak, and I couldn't do a lot of stuff. I got sick easily and had respiratory problems, and my aunt and uncle were always afraid I'd, like, pass out on the rides and fall to my death or something. So I've *been* there, but all we really did was walk around and eat food, and we couldn't stay long, because the heat got to me."

Bucky stares straight ahead, mind reeling, completely floored to learn that Peter is *so like Steve,* so uncomfortably similar to him, that Bucky genuinely wonders if there's some way the two could be related, and how the hell he ended up with another Steve after seventy years of no Steve at all.

Peter, oblivious to Bucky's inner tangent, continues gleefully rambling. "But now I could actually *go* on the rides! And walk around the park for longer than twenty minutes! Are you sure you don't mind if I invite Ned? I think that'd be a lot of fun!"

"I'm sure," Bucky says, giving him a fond smile. "And tell him it's my treat."

"Really?" the boy asks, a bit sheepishly. "But, I mean—shouldn't we—are you sure it's okay? We need to be saving up, right? Can we afford to be, y'know… wasteful like that?"

"It's not a waste, kid," Bucky says, still smiling, feeling warm from the sun and the joy on Peter's face. "It's good to have celebrations now and then," he reaches over, gently ruffles the kid's hair. "And we have a lot to celebrate."

The temptation to put his palm flat on top of Peter's head and push down until the boy is forced to stand still is almost too great for Bucky to overcome, as the two of them stand waiting at the train station.

Peter is an uncontrollable ball of energy, pacing and tapping his feet to the sidewalk, drumming his fingers against his thighs, bouncing his leg up and down randomly. He seems lost in his own world, childlike glee painted all over his face, continuously interrupted by the brief glances he sends over the crowds of disembarking passengers, waiting for his friend.

Bucky regards him silently, equal parts daunted and impressed that the kid is so excited for their big day.

"Remind me to never give you caffeine," he says to Peter, which snaps the boy out of his enthusiastic jittering.

"Sorry," Peter grins, not really looking all that sorry. "I can't help it! This is so awesome!"

"I'm going to make you ride the Cyclone," Bucky promises, almost to himself. "That should wear you out a little bit."

The kid laughs, his face changing into a playful expression. "It can't be any worse than swinging from webs every night. I think I can handle it."

Before Bucky can disagree with him, a friendly, high-pitched voice calls out, "Peter!" from across the terminal.

They both turn to look, and watch as a portly Asian kid lightly jogs up to them, smiling and waving. "Hey!"

"Hey, Ned!" Peter smiles to his friend. Bucky looks between the two kids and notices, to his genuine surprise, that Ned is actually somehow *shorter* than Peter, even if only by an inch. "Thanks for coming!"

"Of course! Happy birthday. And thanks for inviting me," Ned says, before turning toward Bucky and craning his neck to look up at him. "Oh uh, thank you too, Peter's dad!"

Peter goes very still and very pale, staring at Ned's face incredulously before chancing a nervous look up at Bucky. Bucky plays it cool, swallows the same lurch in his stomach he got the first time Ned called him that over the phone, and says, smoothly, "You're welcome. Peter's told me a lot

about you."

Peter laughs a little, awkwardly, and the strain in his voice is palpable as he tries very hard to act normal. Ned doesn't seem to notice it at all, and hands Peter a brightly colored gift bag with a cheerful, "This is for you!"

"Oh, uh," Peter blinks, surprised. "Wow, thanks! You didn't have to get me anything."

"Actually, I totally did," says Ned, pointing at the bag. "I got you your own, so you won't have to borrow mine three times a month."

Peter lifts a confused brow, then reaches into the bag and pulls out a familiar box. "Ned!" he exclaims, face breaking into a wide, disbelieving grin. "I don't believe this, this is awesome!"

He turns the box around so Bucky can see, angling it so that the harsh train station lights aren't reflecting off of its glossy finish, allowing Bucky to read the bright yellow *Star Wars Box Set* title printed on it.

Still grinning, Peter gives Ned a one-armed hug around the neck, patting his back. "Thanks, man. I love it."

"Figured it was appropriate, since we're hitting up the planetarium and all."

"Speaking of," Bucky says, grabbing the boys' attentions as he points at an approaching train. "That's our train."

Bucky contentedly lets Peter and Ned lead the conversation, more than happy to simply listen to them ramble and debate as they make the journey to the planetarium. It's interesting, watching Peter interact with someone else, someone his own age, someone who is just as bubbly and talkative as he is. Some of the things Ned says make it feel like Bucky's lugging around two Peters, so many parts of their speech patterns are the same—not a surprise, given how much time they spend together.

Peter and Ned steadily grow more hyper and excited the closer they get, to the point that they practically dash off the train when it arrives at their stop. Bucky leisurely walks off after them, earning an eager and slightly impatient, "Come ooon!" from Peter when he notices how far behind them Bucky is.

So just for the fun of it, Bucky smirks and says, "Actually, wait here. I need to head to the bathroom."

He has to bite down on the bark of laughter that threatens to escape at the "are you kidding me" look on Peter's face as Bucky turns and heads down the terminal hallway, giving the boys a small wave as he does.

He spends a little extra time at the sink in the bathroom, making sure his hat is pulled down over his forehead and his sweater isn't slipping low enough around his neck to expose the metal plate that makes up his entire left shoulder. The black glove covering his left hand isn't exactly inconspicuous, but it's not as memorable as the bare metal of his prosthetic would be.

With his facial hair growing in thicker—the perfect halfway point between stubble and an actual beard—he feels a little more confident venturing into somewhere as crowded and busy as Luna Park, at least for one day. He knows he's capable of hiding in plain sight if he has to, if it comes to that.

Satisfied that he looks about as far from *Sergeant James Barnes* as he can get, Bucky makes his way back down the hall, toward where he told Peter and Ned to wait, but stops just before the mouth of the hallway, picking up on Ned's voice from around the corner.

"Dude, you were right," Ned says, sounding oddly awestruck. "Your dad is so freaking cool."

Bucky leans against the wall, out of sight, surprised and—*embarrassed*—when Peter laughs and gushes, "I told you!" the pride overflowing from his voice. "You don't even know, Ned. He's, like, the coolest person I've ever met."

"Not to mention *jacked,*" says Ned, making Peter laugh. "Seriously, man, his biceps have biceps. How much does he work out?!"

"I dunno," Peter tries his best to sound oblivious, Bucky can tell, but the kid *really* sucks at lying. "He *does* do this one awesome thing, though. We go for jogs and stuff in the evenings, 'cause —'cause he's helping me get better at—fitness, for gym class. And so sometimes we'll do training exercises, but we'll be out in public without any equipment, so—he can do a bicep curl while lifting me."

"*Awesome,*" Ned practically sighs, speaking under his breath like he's completely blown away. "Man, you're lucky. You got the coolest foster dad in New York."

"Yeah," says Peter, and the sincerity in his small voice tugs at Bucky's heart. "I know. I know exactly how lucky I am."

"Do you…" Ned starts, but pauses, as if not sure how to frame his question. "Do you… think he'll, like, adopt you…?"

Bucky goes very still, subconsciously holding his breath as he plasters himself against the wall. Peter is quiet for a long moment, and Bucky's mind races at what the boy will say; terrified of what he might hear, even if part of him wants to hear Peter say it.

"That's what birthday wishes are for, I guess."

The rest of the day goes smoothly, but it goes by in a haze for Bucky. Peter and Ned seem to have a good time, laughing and joking as they explore the vastness of the universe and the known vacuum of space from inside a giant, dark dome. The boys make a nerdy game of quizzing each other about planetary trivia, challenging each other in that timeless way boys do, but with a friendly, supportive atmosphere to it, both of them smiling and congratulating each other whenever one of them gets a question right.

Bucky lets Peter drag him over to all of his favorite displays, the ones he's most fascinated with, the NASA demonstrations and models and the astrophysics presentation, chattering endlessly about stars and space travel and, surprisingly, only mentioning Star Wars a dozen times or so.

But try as he might, Bucky is only half paying attention, guiltily recalling the gifts he has stored back at their apartment, beneath the floorboards, knowing now that it's not what Peter is wishing for, and that it's the best Bucky can do, and hating that those two things aren't the same. He'll need a lot more than a stolen ID to ever give Peter what he really wants, and the idea of that seems so much like an unreachable fantasy that it weighs on Bucky, heavily.

The weight doesn't lift as they leave the planetarium and stop for lunch, and doesn't lift as they

commute to Coney Island, but oddly, as they step through the entrance to Luna Park, and Bucky glances over at Peter and sees the pure, unrestrained *excitement* on the boy's face, as bright and glowing as the flashing lights on the rides around them, he finds some semblance of confidence.

Peter deserves everything he wants and more, and Bucky will probably never be able to give him anywhere close to that, but there *are* things he *can* do for him, things *only* he can do for him.

And if this thrown-together mess of a life is enough for Peter, then it's enough for Bucky, too.

His resolve renewed, Bucky makes good on his promise and leads the boys straight to the Cyclone, patting Peter's shoulder reassuringly as the boy blinks owlishly up at the rollercoaster.

"They've changed it," Bucky remarks, gaze contouring the giant structure. "When I was your age, I swear this thing was held together with duct tape and dental floss."

Ned laughs, but Peter glances up at him, like he isn't sure if Bucky is kidding or not. "Oh yeah," Bucky tells him, nodding solemnly. "This thing was a deathtrap. The only people who ever rode it were young, dumb guys daring each other to take the risk."

"Maybe we should go on the Ferris wheel instead…" Ned suggests limply, taking a subtle step back away from the line-up.

"Nope," says Bucky, taking both kids by the shoulders and walking them straight to the back of the line. "Rite of passage, boys. Today, you become men."

"Why can't we just go through puberty like everyone else?!" cries Ned, forcing a laugh out of both Bucky and Peter, especially when the woman in front of them turns around and looks at Ned like he's some raving lunatic.

"It won't be that bad," Bucky assures.

And he's right.

As far as he and Peter are concerned, anyway.

"Wanna go on the Ferris wheel next?" Peter gently asks his friend as they exit the ride, whose pale, sweaty complexion vaguely reminds Bucky of the last time he forced someone onto this thing.

"Hhuunngh," Ned groans in response, and Bucky fetches a bottle of water for the poor kid from the nearest food stand.

"Here," Bucky says as he hands the bottle over. "If you want to just sit still for a little while, there's a couple of benches over by the petting zoo."

Predictably, Peter whips his head up and fixes Bucky with that thrilled, sparkly-eyed look of his. "Petting zoo?"

After Ned settles his stomach relaxing on the bench, and Peter gets his fill of playing with a herd of goats and a warren of rabbits, the three of them continue their tour of the park, Ned handling the less-extreme rides much better than he did the Cyclone.

They stock up on greasy, overpriced fair food and snacks, Peter wanting the full Coney Island Experience on his first "real" trip to the park. They walk around and play games as they eat, and Ned is consistently impressed with Peter's knack for winning the rigged carnival games.

By the end of it, both Ned and Peter have their arms full of ugly, cheaply-made stuffed animals, and Bucky ends up carrying Peter's gift bag from Ned and their drinks as they make their way out of the park. A man walking with three younger children makes eye contact with Bucky, gestures to all the crap he's carrying while his kids are only holding their ice cream cones, and gives him a friendly, "What are dads for, hey?" as they pass each other, nodding to Bucky's own full hands.

The trip back to the station where Ned has to transfer trains to get home goes by smoothly, and the boys say their goodbyes with a hug and another thank-you from Peter. Ned waves at Bucky as he gets off the train, calling out, "Bye, Peter's dad! Thanks again for inviting me!"

Bucky waves back, and then the doors are closing and the train is moving, and he slouches appreciatively into his seat, Peter following suit, leaning against his shoulder as he fiddles with the spindly arms of his hideous monkey stuffed animal.

"Thanks for today, Bucky," Peter says with a contented sigh, relaxing further against his side. "I had a lot of fun. This is the best birthday I've ever had."

"I'm glad you had fun, kiddo," Bucky says, lifting his arm and wrapping it around Peter so he can snuggle into him. "But it's not quite over yet. I have another surprise for you."

"Really?" Peter asks, looking up at him with surprise. "But… what—we did so much today?"

"Day's not over yet," Bucky grins, unable to hide his own bubble of excitement that swells inside of him. "We've still got your patrol and then training, after."

Peter groans, turning his face into Bucky's arm and hiding it in his sleeve. "Do we have to do training today? I think not falling off the Cyclone should count."

Bucky chuckles, patting the kid's shoulder. "Don't worry, kid. Today's a little different. It'll be fun."

"Different how?"

"It's a surprise."

Peter accepts that answer until they get home, and then Bucky has to essentially kick him out to get him to stop asking questions.

"Go do your patrol, and when you're done, meet me on the rooftop of 11th and 31st, okay?" Bucky says, setting Peter's disturbing zoo of stuffed critters on the loveseat, next to his Star Wars box set.

"Okay," Peter says, but he eyes Bucky and the room curiously, the gears turning beneath that mop of curls to try and deduce what the surprise is. "I won't be long!"

"Sounds good, kid. Be safe."

"You too," Peter says, slipping his mask and goggles on and waiting until the coast is clear off the balcony before he deftly leaps onto the roof, and then he's off.

Bucky pulls the gifts out of the secret cavity beneath the floor and places them in an empty garbage bag, slinging it over his back to carry easily as he makes his way to their rendezvous location.

It's not much of a wrapping job, but the air of mystery and surprise will still be there when Peter opens the bag, he supposes. Bucky sets the bag down by the edge of the rooftop and then sits patiently on the railing, waiting.

He doesn't wait long, seeing Peter come flying from blocks away. Peter lands eagerly on the railing across the roof from him, and slips off his mask as he bounds up to Bucky, eyeing the bag curiously.

"Hi," he says, stopping in front of Bucky and the garbage bag lying at his feet.

"Hey," Bucky smiles, warmly. "You ready?"

Peter looks up from the garbage bag and nods, excitedly. "Yep!"

"All right, then. Open it."

Peter gives him one last quizzical look, before he bends down and lifts the mouth of the bag. Bucky smiles at the puzzled expression that crosses Peter's face as he reaches in and pulls out a wooden bat.

"Are we…" he starts, hesitantly. "Are we gonna start weapons training now or something?"

"No," Bucky chuckles. "There's more inside the bag, keep going."

Peter does, and opens the bag as wide it can to reveal the old ball and the two worn-down mitts.

"Baseball?" he asks, confused, looking up at Bucky with one eyebrow raised.

"Yeah," Bucky says, smiling again. "I thought I could teach you how to play. Work it into the training regimen, now and then. And since summer vacation is almost here, you'll need stuff to do all day.  Going to the batting cages and trying to go a few rounds without breaking anything would be good practice at concealing your strength. We can practice on the diamonds in the meantime."

Peter picks up one of the leather gloves, turning it over in his hands, running his fingers along the stitched seams, reverently. "This is awesome," he practically whispers, then looks up at Bucky and grins, that beaming smile that Bucky loves so much, and jumps to his feet so he can surge forward and wrap his arms around Bucky's neck in a tight hug.

Bucky hugs him back, warm and securely. "Happy birthday, Peter."

"Thank you," Peter says into his shoulder, arms tightening. "For this, and—for today. I'm really excited, this sounds like a lot of fun."

"Yeah. So am I, kid," Bucky says, giving him a pat on the back and then letting him go. "This stuff is in good condition, but it's still used, so it doesn't really matter if one of us accidentally uses our super strength and shatters the ball or something."

Peter stills for a moment, an odd look flashing across his face, but then it's gone, as quickly as it came. Bucky opens his mouth to ask what's up, but Peter holds the glove out to him and asks, "Can we play now?"

The hopeful tone in the kid's voice interrupts Bucky's plan of asking, and the man smiles and takes the glove, ruffling Peter's hair with his metal hand. "Sure thing, kiddo."

Bucky collapses exhaustedly on the loveseat when they arrive back home, and Peter is quick to follow, sprawling on top of his sleeping bag beside the man, knocking most of the stuffed

monstrosities to the floor.

“Hey, uhm,” Peter starts a few minutes later, a little nervously. “I’ve been wondering something. I know it’s not—I know you said, you can’t talk about what—what happened after the war, but—I just wanna know, you’re… you’re like me, right?”

Bucky blinks, brows furrowing slightly in confusion as he turns and looks at the boy. “Like you?”

“Yeah, you know… enhanced.”

Frowning, Bucky turns his face away in hopes that Peter won’t see the way his jaw has tightened at the question. This isn’t exactly the conversation he wants to be having after the great day they had, and certainly not on a day that’s supposed to be about celebrating *Peter,* but—

He sighs, giving the boy a small nod, not wanting to open his mouth and say something he can’t take back, give the kid too much information, put him even more at risk.

“I knew it,” Peter whispers, his eyes wide and full of admiration. “I knew you were a superhero.”

Bucky huffs a humorless laugh, more caught off guard than anything, and bows his head slightly as incredulity fills him. “I’m no hero, kid.”

“But—you’re enhanced,” says Peter, insistently, voice soft and unwavering. “And you’re—you were friends with *Captain America,* and he’s, like, the ultimate superhero. And your arm—”

“None of those things make me a hero,” Bucky says, swallowing thickly. His nerves feel like they’re on fire, burning uncomfortably from listening to Peter sing his praises, without knowing anything about him at all, how wrong he is, how backwards. It fills him with immense guilt and even more shame, to know that he’s lying to Peter by omission, letting the kid believe he’s a better man than he is, that he’s good.

That he’s like Peter.

The kid seems to pick up on his discomfort, and says, more gently, but no less adamantly, “You save people, that’s what makes you a hero. Isn’t that why you joined the Howling Commandos?”

Unintentionally, Bucky tightens his hand into a fist, leaning forward to rest on his knees. Things like this are the hardest to remember; how he felt about things, decades ago, his drives, his motivations. He’s spent so many years thinking only in facts, in events and their outcomes, choices and their consequences. The result of joining Steve’s team as his Sergeant, and not the cause, the reason lost to him, now.

He doesn’t know how to answer Peter, so he sighs and gives him the half-truth, a cop-out. “I don’t know.”

Peter regards him quietly, observing him in that soft, sincere way of his, wise beyond his years, his dark eyes searching Bucky’s face as if reading him, as if he can tell how the man is feeling just by the sight of him.

“Do you regret it?” the boy suddenly asks, gently, his voice small but still endlessly curious. “Following Captain America, I mean.”

Bucky stiffens. Deep down, some ancient, slumbering part of himself roars to life with a determined and deafening *no,* so insulted by the idea that he could ever regret following Steve anywhere.

But the rest of him, the "newer" parts of himself, the pieces that have been forcibly assembled to make him who he is now, instead of who he used to be, all come together and mourn, angrily. It's not regret, but it's just as insidious, just as overbearing, more akin to sorrow and shame. To despair.

The only thing Bucky regrets is surviving that fall.

He sighs, unable to bring himself to look at Peter. "A lot of good people would still be alive if I hadn't," he admits, then instantly wishes he hadn't, knowing he's opened the floodgate for Peter now, invited him to ask for clarification, getting closer and closer to the truth, about him, about Hydra.

But Peter says nothing for a long moment. Then, unsure, like he doesn't know if he should or not, he looks up at Bucky and very quietly says, "I wouldn't."

Bucky turns and looks at him, struck by the implication of what the boy just said, and Peter gazes back up at him with his dark, hopeful eyes, so unbearably trusting. Panic wells inside of him with a devastating force, knowing that Peter is right, that if Bucky hadn't been there that night, that guy would have taken Peter from him before Bucky even met him.

Agony spears Bucky open right through the middle, at that thought. What would have happened if he hadn't been there, if he'd gone down a different street that night, not even turning his head at the sound of a gun firing a few blocks away, if he had minded his own business and gone straight home, not caring at all for the child he had just lost, without even realizing it.

That if he didn't have this arm—this thing that used to only be a weapon of Hydra—he might not have been able to save this kid.

He never would have known Peter at all.

Peter picks up on the lost, speechless discourse surging through Bucky, like he always does, and tries to give him a reassuring expression, his smile gentle and comforting as he says, "Even if bad things happened to you… even if you *did* bad things… that doesn't make the good things you've done any less good, Bucky. It doesn't make you any less of a hero."

Bucky shakes his head, wanting to change the subject, but the guilt and the shame and the desire for Peter to know that he's *wrong* about him are too much, and he closes his eyes with a depressed sigh. "I see a lot of things when I look at myself, kid," his voice deepens, grows rougher, spiteful in spite of himself. "But I don't see a hero."

Peter's voice is small and sweet and a little sad.

"I do."

When Bucky meets his eyes this time, Peter smiles at him, shyly, his expression soft and full of love. Anguish and a fierce, unbreakable feeling of affection for this kid next to him fills Bucky, and he lays his metal hand on the boy's shoulder and pulls him in, wrapping it around his back, holding him to his chest.

*I'll never let anything happen to you,* Bucky mentally promises him, his hand tightening in the back of Peter's hoodie as he hugs him tighter. His eyes clench shut, trying to keep the emotions at bay, scared that if he gives in now to the temptation of letting Peter see him fall apart, he'll never be able to go back. He has to hold it together, not just for himself, not for his own survival, but for his child.

He'll do anything to be the hero Peter needs him to be.

Chapter End Notes

Not shown in this chapter: Bucky proving to Ned he's capable of doing a bicep curl while holding a teenager, which leads to him walking around Coney Island with Peter on one arm and Ned on the other, curling them like dumbbells to the confusion of the general inhabitants of Brooklyn.

Thank you so much for reading, you guys!! I hope you liked this chapter.

Until next time!

# And The World Is Watching

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys, once again I'd just like to say—*thank you so damn much* for the love you've shown this story. Every comment, kudos, bookmark, tumblr message—you have no idea how much they mean to me, and I am so incredibly grateful for all your support! I had no idea this guilty-pleasure fic would be this insanely popular, hahaha. You're all amazing!
>
> I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Tighten your grip more. If you swing too loose, the bat will fall right out of your hands."

Peter listens, repositioning his hands on the grip, looking back and forth between the handle and Bucky as the man waits to pitch. Bucky idly tosses the ball up and down with one hand as he instructs Peter into the right position, coaching his stance.

"Relax your shoulders," Bucky says, catching the ball again. "You won't be able to swing very wide if you're all hunched up like that."

"Maybe that's a good thing," Peter grimaces, glancing behind Bucky at the rest of the park, filled with people enjoying the warmth and sunshine, just as they are. "I feel like I'm holding a rocket launcher. What if I hit somebody?"

Bucky smiles, crouching into his own stance to prepare to pitch. "You won't, because you're going to concentrate on controlling your strength and keeping the ball in the field. Right?"

"Right," Peter says, sounding anything but confident.

"You can do it," Bucky assures, winding up the throw. Peter braces himself, bat at the ready, and Bucky focuses on pitching it to him gently at the barrel height of the bat. The kid swings, and the familiar, wooden *clap* of the bat hitting the ball resonates between them.

Peter raises his hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he stares out into the field, searching for the ball. "Oh, crap, where did it go? Did it leave the park?"

"Not… quite," says Bucky, biting his lip to stifle a laugh as he gestures to the ground, two feet in front of Peter. "I think you were concentrating a little *too* much, pal."

Peter gapes down at the ball incredulously, then gives Bucky a disbelieving, pouting frown that does make the man laugh out loud, this time. Bucky steps forward and picks up the ball, giving Peter a comforting pat on the shoulder as he says, "It just takes practice, kid. There's nothing wrong with holding back, but learning to control how much of your strength you're using at any given time will come in handy, trust me."

"So do you think I'm ready for my Yankees audition?"

"With a swing like that? Yeah, actually." Bucky grins, pre-emptively. "I'm sure you'll *ace* it."

Peter groans, covering his face with his hands like Bucky's joke caused him tangible, physical pain. Bucky laughs again, ushering Peter back into place as he steps back to prepare for another pitch.

"Just work your way up," Bucky tells him as he winds up another throw. "Swing the bat just a little harder this time, and a little harder the next time, until you find the right amount of force to get some distance without breaking anything. We'll worry about accuracy and trajectory later."

"Got it," Peter nods, and this time, when he hits the ball, it actually does get sent flying—not exactly home run material, but at least Bucky has to actually *move* to go and pick it up again.

"Hey, uhm," Peter starts, hesitantly, waiting patiently until Bucky walks back over with the ball. "So, uhh… I only have two exams left until school is over, and then, uh—well, next week is the graduation ceremony, and they're—they do this awards thing where they give medals to the honor students from every grade, and I, uhm, apparently I'm going to get two, f-for having the top marks in both my grade and the school overall, so…"

Peter looks up at him, shyly, face red in embarrassment, or nervousness, or both.

"I was wondering if… you'd come? To the ceremony?"

Bucky stops, ball in hand as he gazes down at Peter in surprise. The kid's cheeks redden further the longer Bucky stares at him, until Bucky snaps out of it with a slight shake of his head, frowning as he says, "What are you saying, kid? Of course I'll be there."

Peter blinks, eyes widening with his own surprise as he blurts, "You—really? You don't mind?"

"You know I don't really like crowds," Bucky admits with a slight shrug. "But this is a special occasion. You've worked really hard, Peter. You deserve to get recognized for that." He hands Peter the ball, patting the top of the boy's head once his hands are free. "Besides, someone's gotta be there to scare off all those creepy, rich parents who are probably going to stand there, throwing money at you, like that will somehow make their own dumbass kids smarter."

Peter laughs, leaning in to Bucky's side with his ball and bat in hand as Bucky puts an arm around his shoulder, leading him out of the park and back toward their apartment.

"Are you sure your boss won't mind? I mean, it's during the day, so…"

Bucky huffs a small laugh. "I thought Frank's wife was chatty, but ever since I told him about you? Guy doesn't shut up about it. I don't think he totally believes that you actually exist. So if I told him I needed the afternoon off for your graduation, I think he'd be thrilled."

The kid giggles again, his eyes lighting up brilliantly beneath the sunshine as he says, "Hey, I can finally show you my school! Our robotics lab is really awesome. I can show you the prosthetics display we have!"

"Just as long as you don't try and add me to it," Bucky jokes, dropping his hand from Peter's shoulder and giving him an affectionate flick to the back of the head, instead.

True to Bucky's word, Frank doesn't mind at all that he asks for the afternoon off to attend Peter's award ceremony.

“You tell him congratulations for me,” his boss says as Bucky dons his sweater to leave. “And tell him to stop by sometime if he’s got nothing to do during the day. I wanna meet him.”

*I can tell,* Bucky internally laments, giving his boss a polite nod as he says, “I’ll let him know. See you tomorrow.”

Frank says his goodbyes as Bucky leaves, making the journey to Peter’s school in record time, unable to slow his pace as his nerves and uncertainty flare up. He knows a big, affluent high school graduation isn’t exactly the likeliest place for him to run into trouble, but still. Knowing he’ll be surrounded by strangers on all sides sets him on edge, as it always does.

The ceremony is held in the auditorium, packed with parents, students and faculty alike, all crowding around the large stage that takes up most of the gymnasium floor as the bleachers are filled wall-to-wall with parents holding pamphlets. Bucky chooses the corner closest to the exits to stand in, his back to the wall so he can survey the crowd before him, more for peace of mind than anything; the last thing he wants is for an unexpected, harmless surprise to trigger his shaky nerves and ruin Peter’s big day.

He positions himself so that there’s no way someone could sneak up on him, while still ensuring he can see the stage, and then he waits. Presenters come and go as the ceremony progresses—the principal, the guest speaker, the student body representative—all giving samey, feel-good speeches that earn polite, scattered applause among the audience. Finally, a woman takes the microphone and begins to announce the awards for the honor roll students, and of course, because Peter is incredible and Bucky is incredibly unlucky, the top award is saved for last.

He is pleasantly surprised, though, when halfway through announcing the freshmen awards, Ned’s name is called and the boy proudly walks across the stage, waving the medal hanging around his neck to his family waiting for him at the bottom of the ramp. Bucky claps for him, smiling, but an odd feeling of dread swirls inside his stomach as he watches Ned step onto the gymnasium floor and get swarmed by his adoring family, all hugging and praising him as cameras flash incessantly all around them, Ned beaming as he’s cherished from every angle, without any hint of doubt.

The kid deserves it, of course he does, and Bucky is glad to see the kind of loving environment that surrounds Ned, but his heart also aches painfully at the sight, knowing that Peter deserves that, too, and that Bucky can’t give it to him. It won’t be the same, Peter stepping off that stage to find only Bucky waiting for him, no gifts, no photos, no downpour of praise; nothing that every single other kid here will get, not all of them as deserving of it as Ned, none of them as deserving of it as Peter.

Bucky swallows the indignation in his throat as he slowly makes his way down the aisle of the bleachers, spying Peter off to the side of the stage, preparing to step onto the platform and receive his awards. Bucky stops several feet from the bottom of the ramp, out of the eyes of all the cameras pointed to it, and waits as the announcer beams and sings Peter’s praises admiringly, grinning as she recounts what a pleasure he is to have in class, how he has earned these awards of excellence with the highest honors.

To Bucky’s shock and satisfaction, the woman’s speech is actually met with enthusiastic applause from behind him, and even from some of the students in front of him—all clapping as loudly and as proudly as he is as Peter walks across the stage to receive both of his medals, blushing furiously as both the announcer and the principal warmly congratulate him.

A helplessly-wide grin spreads across Bucky’s face as Peter starts descending the ramp and sees him, the kid’s eyes lighting up, the way they always do for him, when he spots Bucky in the crowd. Peter grins back, his tie endearingly crooked, tangled in the straps of his medals as he bounds down the ramp, headed straight for Bucky.

But before he can so much as put one foot on the gymnasium floor, Peter is surrounded by people on all sides, all talking at once, trying to shake his hand, take his picture, shove business cards at him with unchecked enthusiasm. Bucky loses sight of him behind the wall of determined strangers —parents, most likely—who have Peter boxed in against the bottom of the stage like he's a celebrity.

Bucky starts moving forward with the intent of carving his way through the obnoxious mob that has his kid cornered, when another camera flash in front of him halts him in his tracks. He freezes, watching as photographers move closer, snapping photos of everything surrounding Peter to try and get the best shot. The group of adults finally give him a little room as Peter maneuvers through them, searching for Bucky, and a stab of shame hits the man right in the gut.

Peter looks overwhelmed, face flushed and senses undoubtedly inundated by all the commotion around him. He looks very different from the boy who was smiling at him only minutes ago, and Bucky grits his teeth, cursing himself for letting Peter get bombarded like that, just because he was too unnerved to step in front of a flashing camera.

Relief floods the kid's face when he sees him again, and Bucky stays rooted in his shame-filled corner as Peter beelines for him, effectively dodging another attempt to steal his attention with a polite, slightly frantic, "Oh, uhm, I'm sorry, my—my dad's waiting for me," as he ducks underneath another hand handing him a business card.

Bucky releases a tense breath when the cameras don't follow Peter over to him, and he takes his hands out of his pockets and opens his arms wide as Peter surges forward into them, wrapping his own around Bucky's center and squeezing him, his frantic heartbeat thudding wildly against Bucky's abdomen.

"I'm so proud of you," he says as he holds the boy tighter, feeling his slight form sag gratefully into his chest, the stress leaving his small body as Bucky wraps him securely in his arms. "You did great, Peter. I'm so damn proud."

Peter's face is smushed against his chest, so when he replies, the words come out as a muffled mess that he's pretty sure are supposed to be, "Thanks, Bucky," before Peter pulls back, happy and exhausted and finally looking a little calmer.

Bucky brushes a lock of curls out of the boy's eyes and asks, "What do you want to do? Want to hang around here for a bit and say hi to your friends? Or we could take that tour of the school like you wanted. Up to you, kiddo."

"Actually…" Peter starts, his voice quiet and a little strained. "Can we maybe save the tour for next time? This is all kinda a little much." He pulls back, rests his hands over his stomach, his face still a little pink. "Plus… I'm hungry."

Smiling, Bucky ruffles his hair and steers both of them toward the doors without a drop of hesitation. "Whatever you say, kid. Want to stop by Delmar's, head home and watch Star Wars?"

"Yes!" Peter grins, the medals around his neck shining in the sunlight as they step outside, the same bright, golden light reflecting in his eyes.

The first week of Peter's summer vacation goes by incredibly fast.

Bucky finds that, with nothing to occupy him during the day, Peter is excessively hyperactive and talkative when Bucky gets home. He goes on longer patrols as Spider-Man, staying out for the better part of the entire day sometimes, but that's still not enough to burn all of his pent-up energy, so Bucky finds himself training the kid much more vigorously than he was previously. He spends hours making the kid run, sometimes racing him, sometimes just forcing him to build endurance. They spar for hours, Bucky coaching Peter on how to disarm and incapacitate an opponent twice his size, and while Peter shows promise in hand-to-hand combat, he shines most brightly in the training they do with his webs.

"Ready?" Bucky asks, baseball in hand as Peter lifts the bat. The wind is cool and sharp up on the building's roof, several stories high in the air, the heat of early summer doing nothing to keep them warm now that the sun has set.

Peter tinkers with his web-shooters slightly, then readies the bat as he nods at Bucky. "Ready."

Bucky aims, building up a substantial amount of force in his arm before he throws the ball. It hurls toward Peter, who hits it with a clean and easy *ping,* sending it flying across the rooftop and above the road below.

"Come on, you can do it!" Bucky says encouragingly as Peter takes off running, his mask and goggles pulled over his face as he lifts his wrists and fires rapidly after the ball.

He has to swing to the building beside the one they're on to get close enough to successfully shoot the ball with his webs, and then he lands on the side of the building across the road and begins to scale up it, ball securely in hand as he climbs the side of the structure all the way to the top.

He swings again to return to the building Bucky is waiting on, flipping and landing gracefully in front of the man, holding the ball out to him with a grin that Bucky can discern even from under his mask.

"That was a close one," Peter says as Bucky takes the ball. "I'm getting faster, though! It didn't even get halfway to the street."

"I saw," Bucky praises with a small smile.

Peter pulls off his mask, grinning. "Still think I have a shot at making Rookie of the Year?"

"If you play for the Red Sox, maybe."

The kid laughs, walking back over to where he left his bat. They do the same exercise several more times, each time Peter hitting the ball harder and sending it farther and farther to try and see if he can catch it with his webs before it hits the ground, or another building.

He'll never say it out loud, but Bucky can't help but feel like he's playing fetch with a puppy to try and wear it out after it's been cooped up indoors all day.

Especially because it takes hours of this exercise for Peter to successfully burn off all of his energy, his web-shooters completely drained of fluid by the time he sleepily smiles and says, "I'm getting kinda tired," when he brings the ball back for what feels like the thousandth time.

"We've been at it for hours, kid," says Bucky agreeably, sticking the ball into his pocket and then bending over to grab the bat while Peter changes into his normal clothes. "Let's get you home and into bed. I have to be up early tomorrow for work."

"That Honda still giving you trouble?" Peter asks as he pulls on his sweater, lifting his backpack

onto his shoulder as he jogs to catch up with Bucky, already heading for the stairs.

“Nah,” Bucky says as they leave the rooftop. “Got that done, but I’m working on sort of a pet project at the moment. Frank brought in an old Yamaha that I’m fixing up on the side.”

Peter’s face scrunches up in thought. “What kind of car is that?”

Chuckling, Bucky shakes his head slightly as he says, “Not a car, kid, it’s a bike.”

The kid’s face lights up, his eyes growing wide and bright as he excitedly exclaims, “Hey, you wanted one of those! Is Mr. Descartes going to sell it when you’re done fixing it?”

“He might,” he says as they leave the building, stepping out onto the much-warmer sidewalk. “It might not be worth much though, even when I get it road-worthy. It was a scrapyard salvage.”

“I wanna see!” says Peter, still bubbling with excitement. “You said you’d teach me how to drive one someday, right? Can I come by and look at it?”

“Ride, not drive,” Bucky corrects, smiling exasperatedly. “And sure, I don’t see why not. Frank keeps breathing down my neck about meeting you, anyway.”

“Yay!” Peter cheers, no longer sounding tired in the slightest. Maybe he should have made him do a few laps before they left the roof. “Can I come by tomorrow?”

“I’ll be leaving before you get up,” Bucky says, shooting Peter a *look,* teasing him for how late he’s been sleeping in ever since summer break started. “But when you’re up and about, sure. I’ll be in the shop all day.”

“Okay,” Peter says, burying his face in the crook of his elbow to stifle a large yawn, his burst of energy apparently over with, for now.

Bucky smiles, wraps an arm around the boy’s shoulders, pulls him in close. “Come on, kid,” he says as they head down the street together. “Let’s get you home.”

“So what time is your boy showing up?” Frank asks in his deep, gruff voice from somewhere behind Bucky, who is lying on his back on an old, rickety creeper, mostly-hidden beneath a jacked-up Kia. The man’s voice echoes against the concrete floor throughout the shop, booming even though Bucky’s pretty sure he’s on the other side of the room.

“Anytime now,” Bucky says, rolling out from under the vehicle and squinting as the bright shop lights hit him in the face. “I told him to just swing by when he gets up, but he’s probably sleeping in.”

Frank grunts, giving him an unimpressed look as he checks his watch. “It’s noon already. You run a loose ship, Barnes.”

“He’s on vacation,” he says, defensively, cleaning the black grease off his hands with the rag that’s looped through his belt strap. “And even when he’s not, I don’t need to run a tight ship. Nobody works harder than my kid.”

Frank shoots him a look that clearly says, *I’ll be the judge of that,* before grabbing the file he came in for from the cabinet and exiting to the door to the dealership. Bucky gives his head a slight

shake with a small, tired smile, before pulling out his crappy cellphone and confirming that is, indeed, already noon.

Bucky frowns, but he isn't exactly worried. After all, he did tell the kid to stop by whenever, telling him he would be at the shop all day. Maybe Peter decided to do his patrol first. Or, more likely, he got sidetracked on the way here by a group of dog-walkers, and is going to show up completely disheveled and covered in hair, and Bucky will have to hose him off before he lets his judgmental boss meet him.

The thought makes Bucky huff a small laugh, and he goes back to work while only half paying attention to the time creeping by. The afternoon drags on slowly as he keeps stealing glances at his phone, wondering where Peter is, if he got caught up in trouble or, most likely, made some new animal friend somewhere and completely lost track of time. Bucky stays calm and unworried until 3:00 P.M. hits, and then the anxiety festers, hot and disruptive in the pit of his stomach.

Sighing, Bucky pulls out his cellphone again and quickly punches in Peter's number. There's only a couple of hours until his shift is over, and Peter should have been here by now—and even if the boy is simply planning to come at the end of the day instead, touching base with him won't hurt. At least Bucky will be able to finish the rest of his day with a clear head and a calm stomach.

But the phone just rings, and rings, and rings. Bucky grips the device tightly in his hand, his anxiety raging. Peter *knows* better than to turn his cellphone off; he knows there might come a time when Bucky needs to get a hold of him *instantly.* Why the hell isn't he answering?

*Maybe he's on the train,* reasons the logical part of his brain, hopefully. *Maybe it's loud and crowded and he can't hear it vibrating in his pocket.* But no, that doesn't make sense—even if Peter was completely overwhelmed by other sounds around him, he would still feel the phone on his person, feel the vibrations through his clothing. There's no way he wouldn't feel it ringing—

—which means he can't answer it.

Bucky grits his teeth, forcing himself to take a deep breath and pocket his phone. He can't keep doing this every time Peter is "lost." There are bound to be times when he can't find or get a hold of the kid—hell, how many times has it happened already, in the few months they've been living together? And Peter's always been fine, every single time. This time will be no different.

He forces himself to continue working, head down and body tense, until only half an hour remains of his shift, and then Bucky gives up, throwing the rag off his belt and making a break for the door. Peter should have been here by now. He should have called to say something came up. Unless he couldn't.

Hands clenched into tight fists, Bucky makes it halfway across the room to the door when, abruptly, it opens. Sharon, Frank's wife, steps through and grins widely at Bucky, her face bright and cheerful.

"Jim, darling," she calls in a singsong voice, stepping aside and holding the door open. "Your son is here!"

The tension turns to lead inside Bucky's body, weighing him down as all of his muscles grow heavy from the strain leaving them. Peter peeks his head in, shyly, but smiles widely when their eyes meet, stepping through the doorway and heading straight for him.

Bucky has half a mind to demand, *where the hell have you been,* when the question catches in his throat, his mind blanking for a moment at the sight of Peter's outfit. The kid is wearing his only

pair of jeans that don't have frayed edges or faded colors; his white, button-down shirt and the deep blue sweater pulled over it are perfectly straight—not hanging off him haphazardly, like his clothing usually does—the sleeves rolled up to his forearms to give the whole thing a spiffier, cleaner look. His sneakers are whiter than usual, as though he washed them.

It's such a stark contrast from how he normally dresses—old, ripped-up jeans and his usual red, baggy hoodie—that Bucky loses his train of thought for a moment. The only other time he's seen Peter dressed up was for his award ceremony last week; other than that, the kid never seemed to really care about his appearance, and while the change isn't necessarily a bad one, Bucky is struck speechless by the sight of his kid looking so… *grown up.*

"Hey!" Peter greets, still grinning as he stops in front of Bucky. "Guess what!"

From the corner of his eye, Bucky sees Frank join his wife at the door, watching them, but he can't take his gaze away from the bizarre sight of Peter's outfit as he numbly asks, "What?"

Peter's grin stretches even wider, his cheeks reddening slightly. "I got a job!"

If Bucky thought he was speechless a moment ago, the words that just left Peter's mouth have him utterly blindsided. "You—what?"

Peter gestures down at himself, at his neat, clean clothes, then smiles up at Bucky again. "Yeah. Well, I thought, uhm—I thought being at home all day would kind of drive me crazy, so—I got dressed up and went to Mr. Delmar's, and asked if he needed any help with the store over the summer. It's only part-time, but he said yes!" His eyes light up with excitement and pride, his cheeks still tinted pink. "So I'm gonna be helping him for a few hours in the evenings and during the days on weekends, if that's—is that okay?"

Snapping back to reality, Bucky shakes off the shock and immediately returns the kid's smile, stepping forward and pulling him into a short hug. "Of course, kid. This is—hell, I'm proud of you. Is this why you didn't answer your phone?"

Peter's face pales a little as he pulls back, his eyes widening. "Oh, crap, I—I'm sorry!" He pulls his cellphone out of his back pocket, opening it and pressing several buttons as he says, "I put it on silent while I was talking to Mr. Delmar, 'cause I wanted to be polite—and then I totally forgot to turn it back up! Sorry."

"It's okay," Bucky says with a small, relieved sigh, giving the boy's shoulder a light pat. "Just… try and remember next time, yeah? You know how I get when I don't know where you are."

"Yeah," Peter nods, eyes downcast and remorseful. "Sorry, B—" he starts to say, and then his eyes dart over to where Frank and Sharon are standing, so quickly that Bucky almost misses it, and he catches himself at the last second, "—*Dad.*"

"It's all right," Bucky says, forcing the words to sound normal, natural, though his chest has gone painfully tight at hearing Peter call him *Dad* for the very first time. "Hey, come on, cheer up. Your first job!"

"And you just turned fifteen, isn't that right?" Frank says, walking over to them as he gives Peter an approving nod. "That's some good work ethic, son. You take after your dad, huh?"

Bucky isn't sure whose face goes redder, his or Peter's—but the kid manages to pull himself together and politely says, "Thanks, Mr. Descartes," as he smiles, sheepishly. "I hope I do."

Bucky can't help the fond, warm expression he knows crosses his face at that. God, his kid is the

cutest thing in the world. He's grateful Peter isn't looking at him and can't see the undoubtedly-sappy look on his face, but then Bucky glances up and sees Sharon grinning at him, knowingly, and he purses his lips and looks away in embarrassment, so Sharon takes pity on him and says, "Why don't you show him around, Jim?"

"Oh, uh," he says, caught off guard, but quickly regaining composure. "Right. Come on, kid. I'll give you the grand tour."

"Mrs. Descartes already showed me the dealership," Peter says as he follows him out of the shop, into the medium-sized wreckage lot behind the building. Bucky shows him all the cars he'll be rebuilding, the newest ones towed in from the salvage yard, and then finally, the skinny white Yamaha he hid beneath an old blue tarp.

"Wow," Peter says, running his hand over the handlebars. "It's kind of smaller than I expected."

"It's a thinner model," Bucky says, steadying the bike off its kickstand as Peter throws his leg over the seat. "Perfect size for you to learn on, actually."

Peter gets comfortable on the bike, shifting his weight slightly as he pretends to steer the engine-less motorcycle. "Will you teach me someday?"

"Someday," Bucky assures, letting go so Peter can try and balance the bike upright by himself. "When do you start working with Delmar?"

"Tomorrow," Peter says as he dismounts the bike. "Uhm, I'll be gone by the time you get home from work."

Bucky nods, throwing the tarp back over the bike after Peter sets it on its kickstand again. "You'd better get an employee discount."

Peter laughs, wrapping his arm around Bucky's side as the man takes him by the shoulder and steers him back through the shop. "You introduced yourself to Frank and his wife, yeah?"

"Yeah," says Peter, nodding. "They're really nice." His face suddenly goes a deep shade of red, all the way to the tips of his ears hidden beneath his curls. "Mrs. Descartes got *really* excited when I asked for you. I think you were right—they totally didn't think I actually existed."

"What'd I tell you?" Bucky says, scowling slightly, perfectly picturing the way Sharon probably squealed and said something horribly humiliating like *Oh, you must be Jim's baby,* to the absolute embarrassment of both of them. "I'm surprised they haven't asked for a copy of your birth certificate yet."

Giggling, Peter waits patiently as Bucky cleans up his work area and pulls his sweater on so they can head home. They poke their heads into the dealership to wish Frank and Sharon a good night, and the woman smiles warmly and pats Peter's shoulder as she invites him to come back and visit anytime. Bucky's marginally surprised when he looks up and sees Frank nodding, agreeing with his wife.

After their polite goodbyes, the two start heading home, Peter instantly rambling about how excited he is for his first day at his first job. Bucky is quiet and listens, patiently, waiting for an appropriate break in Peter's spiel to ask, "What time does he want you there until?"

"Uhh," Peter says, thinking it over. "I think he said until seven or so?"

Nodding, Bucky ruffles the kid's hair and says, "How about I pick you up and take you out to

celebrate?"

Peter's eyes light up, and then a playful, slightly mischievous smile crosses his face as he says, "But we always go to Delmar's to celebrate."

Bucky smiles, affectionately flicking the back of Peter's head. "Make us dinner to take out, then. I'll take you anywhere you want to go after."

"Can we…" Peter starts, shyly, his smile small and hopeful. "Can we maybe head to the park, then? And… play catch?"

Bucky raises an eyebrow at him, but before he can say anything, Peter adds, "Not—not training catch. *Real* catch."

"Sure, kid, I got you those mitts for a reason," he says as he pats Peter's head again, fondly. "Dinner and then catch in the park. Sounds great to me."

"Yeah," Peter says, grinning. "Me, too."

Sure enough, when Bucky walks into Delmar's bodega the next night, he finds Peter behind the counter, helping another employee stock the beverage display. The boy looks up as the bell chimes above the door, and grins when he sees him, that familiar, I'm-so-happy-to-see-you smile that Bucky is simultaneously not used to and not sure he could live without, at this point.

Peter says his goodbyes to Delmar and his new coworkers while Bucky orders their dinner, and then they're on their way to the park, Peter's mouth going a mile a minute as he joyfully recounts his first day of work, even though it was only four hours. Bucky smiles as he listens, the kid's enthusiasm contagious as Peter babbles and bolsters about how much he's looking forward to this new and exciting experience.

"Mr. Delmar said the only thing he isn't gonna train me on is actually making the sandwiches," Peter says with a small shrug. "I'm pretty sure it's because I don't have any, like, kitchen credentials or anything, but he said if he gave me the recipes to his sandwiches, he'd lose his best cus—"

Abruptly, Peter stops, dead in his tracks, and Bucky turns around curiously, a joke about Peter being grateful that Delmar will never have to witness his lack of cooking skills still clinging to his lips, but it evaporates when he notices the wildly-panicked look on the boy's face.

"Pete?" Bucky asks, cautiously, reaching a hand out for the boy's shoulder. "Hey, Peter? What's wrong—"

Suddenly, the shrill, desperate honking of a vehicle barreling down the highway beside them interrupts Bucky and startles them both, and Peter dashes into the alleyway next to them and ducks behind a dumpster as he starts furiously throwing on his Spider-Man uniform.

"Peter," Bucky starts, advancing on the kid who runs past him, throwing his backpack and their bag of sandwiches onto the alley floor as he runs after the out-of-control vehicle with a loud and frantic, "I have to help!"

"Peter!" Bucky calls, but he's too late; Peter webs himself up into the air and starts racing down the highway, swinging desperately after the runaway vehicle.

*Shit,* Bucky curses, taking off running after the boy, dodging around shocked spectators all staring wide-eyed as the vehicle—a fucking city bus, of all things—heads straight for a crowded, busy intersection, going way too fast, the horn blaring urgently as the bus gains speed, never slowing down, even though its brake lights are on.

Bucky runs behind it, behind Peter, who swings as fast as he can to get in front of the bus, to Bucky's horror. He can't do anything but watch as Peter lands on the road in front of the careening vehicle, between it and another car stuck in the intersection, and braces himself as best he can to be hit by the massive contraption full force.

It's as if time slows down for Bucky in that moment. He isn't fast enough to get there, isn't fast enough to stop it or push Peter out of the way as he lifts his hands and *catches* the bus that hits him head-on, pushing him back several feet from the force of it, effectively pinning him between itself and the car behind him, which doesn't even rock from the impact, Peter stopping it, just in time.

Bucky can see Peter's chest heaving from the effort, and the boy flattens both of his hands on the grill of the bus and pushes, creating enough room that he can wiggle out from between it and the car, to the uproarious applause of every pedestrian on all four corners of the intersection.

The sound is like static to Bucky's ears, though, and he pushes past every single person standing between him and his kid, not caring at all how much strength is behind each desperate shove as he beelines straight for the boy still gasping for breath in the middle of the road.

"Kid," Bucky calls, desperately, not recognizing the panicked sound of his own voice as he takes Peter by the shoulders, barely restraining himself from ripping the mask off his face, needing to see him, see that he's okay. "Kid, hey, look at me—are you all right?"

Peter looks up, nodding once, dazed, still too out of breath to speak. Bucky's hands tighten painfully around his shoulders. He wants to scream; wants to bare his teeth and demand to know what the fuck the kid was thinking, if he had any reservations whatsoever about jumping in front of a *runaway bus,* but the slight tremble in the kid's frame diffuses some of his terrified anger, and Bucky heaves a somewhat-relieved sigh and pulls the kid hard against his chest, wrapping his arms around Peter's shoulders and squeezing, tightly, just to feel his heart still beating inside that small torso, hammering wildly against Bucky's own.

Peter's shaking hands come up and fist in Bucky's jacket, hugging him back, and it's then that Bucky hears the sea of commotion all around them—the talking, the opening and shutting of car doors, the sirens in the distance that are steadily growing louder. Bucky glances around them and finds the whole world watching, every single pedestrian staring at them with wide, round eyes, almost all of them holding up their phones, pointed directly at them.

Bucky freezes under what feels like a thousand gazes, and Peter chooses that moment to look up, sees the crowd of people all watching them with their phones raised, too, and he flinches backward out of Bucky's arms, vaulting over the car behind him and then shooting a web as high as he can to swing up off the street and onto a roof, and then he's gone.

The people all turn in the direction Peter went, pointing their phones and their cameras after him, and Bucky swallows thickly and takes advantage of the opportunity to backtrack to the alley where Peter left his bag, his arms and legs feeling numb as he grabs their belongings and begins the long walk home, alone.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!! Hope you all enjoyed this tamer chapter. Real quick, I'd like to answer a couple of FAQs about this story:

"When is Steve/Tony/literally anyone else showing up?"

Soon!! We're very close to being done the fluffy world-building chapters. If it makes you guys feel any better, I was completely wrong in my predictions back in chapter one for how long this story is going to be—we're only about a quarter of the way through it.

"Is this entire fic just Peter and Bucky doing random shit in Queens?"

Nope but in a few chapters you'll wish it was :^)

"When are you going to update???"

Next chapter is already done and being edited, so hella soon!!

Thank you again, darlings! <3 I love you guys.

# Sick

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for all the warm responses on the last chapter, you guys! Here's the next installment. I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Bucky arrives back home, he finds Peter groaning on the loveseat, a frozen bag of tater tots lodged beneath his shirt, against his ribs. Peter looks up at him when he enters, his expression guarded and worried, and presses the bag harder against his side, which is undoubtedly bruised from where the bus pinned him.

Seeing the kid in pain only derails Bucky for a second, before he feels the same swell of anger from before rear its ugly head with a vengeance. He doesn't mask the displeased frown on his face as he approaches the loveseat.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Peter looks up at him, eyes widening slightly at Bucky's livid tone, and opens his mouth to reply, but Bucky cuts him off, before he can. "I'm not angry at you for helping those people, but fucking *hell,* kid, we need to work on your gut reactions, if the best idea you had was to jump in front of a *moving bus* like that. Did you even think before you almost got yourself killed? You didn't, did you?"

"I did!" Peter protests, moving to sit up slightly, then wincing from the pain in his ribs and sliding back down again. "I *did* think about it, I—my webs wouldn't have been strong enough to stop it in time, there was no other choice. I thought that, even if I couldn't catch it, maybe I could slow it down enough so that nobody got hurt."

"Except you," Bucky hisses, the anger bubbling up once again. "You're damn lucky that you walked away from that with only a couple of bruised ribs, you reckless little fool."

"I'm sorry," Peter says, looking apologetic, but also determined, his expression hardening slightly. "For—for worrying you, I mean. But I'm not sorry I stopped the bus."

"By *jumping in front of it.*"

"But I stopped it!"

Bucky lifts a hand to his temple and starts gently massaging it to stem the budding headache he can feel coming on. He sighs in frustration, trying to remain reasonable in the face of his anger and fear. "You did, and I'm proud of you for that," he says, deceptively calm, "but this careless attitude has gotta *stop,* Peter. I can't handle it. You have to promise me—no more throwing yourself in front of buses, no more following random strangers into empty alleys, no more confronting criminals carrying fucking *guns*—it stops right now, you hear me? Or Spider-Man won't be patrolling on his own anymore."

"What?" Peter balks, face reddening slightly at the idea. "You're—you're gonna follow me around

while I patrol?"

"If that's the only way I can stop you from doing stupid shit? Yeah, you better believe I will," he says as he sits beside the kid on the loveseat, deeply sighing to try and quell his nerves, the irritation still coursing through him. "Peter, come on, if you won't do it for yourself, do it for me. I'm starting to feel my age from how worried I am about you all the time."

"I'm sorry," Peter says again, softer now, and Bucky turns and sees the genuinely regretful look in the boy's eyes, in his slumped shoulders. "I hate making you worry, it's just… when I saw those people in that car, about to be hit, I—all I could think was, *they need my help, if I don't do something, they'll get hurt.* I couldn't let that happen."

"What about me, huh?" Bucky asks, poking the kid in his other side, the unbruised one, making him giggle and squirm at the ticklish feeling. "If I have to sit and watch you almost get killed one more time, kid, I swear I'm gonna go blind from the stress."

"Stop—stop tickling me," Peter begs, laughing until his eyes are wet, clutching his bag of tater tots desperately. "Ow, ow, oww! My ribs!"

"Seriously, Peter, promise me," Bucky implores, moving his hand up to the boy's shoulder. "Promise me you'll be more careful. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

Peter nods, shyly, then gives him a sheepish smile. "Okay. I promise."

Bucky smiles back and pats the kid's shoulder, then releases a long, tired breath, leaning back into the sofa and allowing the tension to leave his body.

Peter is quiet for a long moment, then hesitantly asks, "What are we going to do about the videos…?"

The tension resurfaces in an instant. Bucky frowns down at his lap, keeps his gaze adverted as he says, "I think it's time we came up with an escape plan, kiddo."

He watches Peter lower his gaze to the floor from the corner of his eye, the boy giving a solemn nod. Bucky waits to see if he'll say anything in response, but he stays quiet, lost in thought. He doesn't blame him. The situation looks bleak.

Realistically, the only people who actually *know* Bucky and Peter and could identify Bucky from those videos are Frank and his wife, Ned, and maybe old man Delmar—he highly doubts that anyone from Peter's award ceremony got a good enough look at him to remember his face. So that just leaves Steve and Hydra, hence the need for an escape plan.

"We're going to assemble you a bugout bag, okay?" Bucky says, turning to look at Peter. "And then start preparing to leave at a moment's notice. I don't think there's any need to jump the gun and skip town right away—maybe we'll get lucky, and nothing will come of it. But we shouldn't risk it. Let's make arrangements now, just in case, so if worse comes to worst, we're ready."

"Okay," Peter says.

"And…" Bucky adds, hesitantly, "in the meantime, kid, you should be a little more discreet when you're out as Spider-Man. Change up your outfit, stick close to the ground, that sort of thing. We can't afford to draw attention to ourselves right now."

Peter frowns, his brows furrowing unhappily. "For how long?"

“Until this all blows over,” Bucky says. “Or, if we’re discovered, then… maybe forever.”

A somewhat crushed look crosses Peter’s face, and he folds in on himself, smushing the tater tots against his side. Bucky regards him quietly, his heart sinking at the boy’s depressed expression.

“I’m sorry, kid,” he says, exhaling. “This is my fault. I shouldn’t have blown your cover like that.”

“No, it’s—it’s okay,” Peter says quickly, maneuvering himself so he can lean against Bucky on the uninjured side of his ribs. “No matter where we are, I can still help people, even if it’s not… as Spider-Man. So—it’s okay, if that has to change. I don’t care about not being Spider-Man if it means I get to stay with you.”

Bucky runs his hand through the boy’s hair, letting him sag deeper against his side with a tired, slightly pained groan, which has Bucky looking down at the wet bag of processed potatoes draped across Peter’s side. “Okay,” he says, with another pat to the kid’s head. “Now let’s take a look at those bruises.”

Later in the summer, on a warm, rainy morning, Bucky wakes as he usually does—early, hours before Peter even begins to stir—and goes about his own morning routine, which mostly involves mentally dragging himself back to the world of the living.

It’s an average morning, at first. Even though it’s warm outside, the downpour of rain makes their apartment feel cooler as Bucky starts preparing breakfast, not too concerned with being quiet, since it’s time for Peter to wake up, anyway. Peter likes to sleep in whenever he can, but on days that he needs to be up early—for school or, like today, for work—he’s usually pretty good about getting himself off the loveseat and into the shower without Bucky having to badger him much.

But not today, apparently. Even with all the noise Bucky doesn’t hesitate to make as he cooks, Peter doesn’t so much as twitch. He pays no mind to the sleeping boy on the other side of the kitchen’s small island counter for as long as he can, but when breakfast is made and the smell of freshly cooked eggs and bacon still hasn’t roused Peter in the slightest, Bucky can’t deny the inkling of worry that settles in his stomach.

He pushes it down until he’s done plating up their meal. Even if Peter is completely exhausted, Bucky knows he won’t say no to a hot breakfast. The kid is always hungry; he’s never once turned down food in all the time Bucky’s known him.

“Kid,” Bucky says, not trying to be overly loud nor overly quiet as he gently shakes the boy’s shoulder, wrapped head to toe in his thick, puffy sleeping bag. “Kid. Hey, Peter, it’s time to wake up. You have work in a few hours.”

The boy doesn’t even move. Bucky can barely see the top of Peter’s head, just the few tufts of hair sticking out of the mouth of his sleeping bag, but he can still tell that the kid is lying utterly still. Almost unnaturally so.

Frowning, he nudges him again, saying a little louder, “Come on, Peter, up you get. Breakfast is getting cold.”

But he still doesn’t move, not even a groan. Bucky feels something like a sharp tack pierce the inside of his chest, his hands moving a little too fast, a little too rough, as he sharply pulls back the sleeping bag. “Hey—”

The words cut off as they leave his mouth, his mind going blank as he sees Peter's face, as his hand makes contact with the boy's bare arm. Alarm blazes inside of Bucky, his fingers trembling as he tries once more to shake the boy back to consciousness. "Peter, wake up, you have to wake up."

His hand recoils instinctively when he touches the boy's red, flushed face. He's hot, he's way too hot—his skin feels like Bucky just touched a lit element. Peter's eyes are clenched shut, his forehead and cheeks gleaming with sweat, his brows furrowed, as if in pain. *Nightmare?* Bucky wonders, at first, but no; that wouldn't be enough to cause a fever like this. Swallowing thickly, Bucky presses his palm to the boy's face again, cupping it, confirming to himself that he really *is* that unnaturally warm, literally burning up.

"Peter," Bucky tries, peeling the sleeping bag away from the kid's body. "Hey, kid, you feel pretty warm. Wake up, let me look at you."

When he pulls the bag down to the kid's waist, Peter hisses painfully in his sleep, curling in on himself and wrapping his arms around his chest, suppressing a light shiver. Bucky gently tries to pull his arms open, kneeling down beside the couch so he can get a closer look at the boy, as if he could physically see what's causing his fever.

"Don't—kid, come on, don't curl up like that, you're already way too hot," he pleads, but Peter whines, voice laden with ache and weariness, trying to hug himself again as Bucky pulls his hands away. Peter's eyes slowly blink open, hazy and unfocused, obscured by his damp bangs. He looks straight ahead, at Bucky—but doesn't seem to see him, his face twisting in pain as he sags pitifully into the couch.

"Bucky?" he hoarsely whispers. Bucky's heart drops down into his stomach at the sound of Peter's voice—it sounds nothing like him. "Cold," the boy moans, still trying to pull his hands free.

"You just feel cold, kiddo," he says, softly, letting the boy have one of his hands back so that he can lean down and brush the wet bangs out of Peter's face, smoothing them back. "You're burning up. If you get any hotter, you'll cook your brain."

Peter tiredly shakes his head, then lays it against the loveseat's armrest, his eyes slipping closed again. "Please… so cold."

"Can you eat something?" Bucky tries, not knowing what else to do but keep the boy's wet hair out of his eyes. "Maybe some hot breakfast will warm you up? We still have painkillers from the bus incident. They might bring your fever down. What do you say? We still have some orange juice too, that sounds good, yeah?"

But Peter doesn't say anything, and his pained breathing evens out slowly until he's unnaturally still and silent again. Sighing, Bucky sits up and gives the kid a quick onceover—his face is red, but beneath that, his complexion is almost freakishly pale. His arms are stark white against the navy color of his sleeping bag, so light that every single blue vein is visible. Bucky's breath nearly stops at the sight of it.

It's then, he realizes, that something is seriously wrong with Peter.

The first thing he does is call Delmar to tell him that Peter is too sick to come in today. The man is agreeable and sympathetic, giving Bucky a sincere sounding, "You take care of that boy and tell him to call me when he is feeling better, and then I put him back on the schedule, yeah?" before they say goodbye.

The second thing he does is call Frank, though Sharon is the one who picks up.

“Jim, darling?” she asks when she hears his voice. “Now what are you calling here for? Are you not coming in today?”

“Sorry, no, I—” he swallows again, trying to get a handle on the shaky, watery sound of his voice. “I can’t. My kid is… he’s sick, he’s really sick. He needs me.”

The woman gasps quietly, her tone turning a lot less curious and a lot more kind. “Oh Jim, oh no, the poor thing. What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know yet,” Bucky says, helplessly, sitting again beside the loveseat so he can feel Peter’s still-much-too-high temperature. “He’s burning up. He’s really hot. And he can’t stay awake.”

“How high is his fever?” Sharon asks, much calmer than Bucky sounds at the moment. He frowns, trying to get a good range of the temperature through his metal hand, but it’s too hard to pinpoint.

“I don’t have a thermometer,” he admits, feeling a stab of shame at admitting that to the woman, what she must think of him. “This—this has never happened before.”

“He’s never gotten sick before?” she asks, the surprise evident in her warm voice. Bucky ducks his head, scrambling to come up with an excuse, a lie—something that wards off suspicion.

“Not since I’ve had him,” Bucky says, and there’s real, genuine guilt in his voice, though he doesn’t know why, but at least it will help convince Sharon. “I wasn’t… around, when he was younger.”

“Oh, Jim…”

Bucky grits his teeth. There’s pity in her voice, but he knows it’s not for him—it’s for Peter, the son she thinks he walked out on or left—the deadbeat dad who’s only just now figuring this shit out, fifteen years too late, fucking helpless when he should be an expert.

“Listen, it’s going to be okay,” Sharon says, her voice soothing and yet strong, confident and caring all at once. “Do you have any Tylenol or ibuprofen?”

He closes his eyes, trying to remember the label on the bottle of painkillers they still have, what kind they are. *Red.* Red cap, red sticker on the side—“Yeah, we have Tylenol.”

“Try and get him to take a couple,” she says, calmly. “And make sure he drinks a lot of fluids. If you’re really worried about how warm he is, get him into a cool bath, but not cold, you don’t want to put him into shock. Just enough to help his body fight it.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, swallowing again, feeling ashamed and grateful all at once. “Thanks, Sharon.”

“Of course, darling, don’t you worry. He’ll be just fine. And listen here—if you need us, you call, you hear me? If you need to take him somewhere, I know Frank will be there in his truck in a heartbeat. He adores that boy.”

*So do I,* Bucky almost says, hating this oppressively awful, helpless feeling. “Thank you,” he says instead, not knowing what else to say.

“Go take care of your baby,” Sharon gently replies. “And call if you need to.”

“I will,” Bucky promises, and then they say their goodbyes, leaving him once again alone, just him and his sick, unconscious kid. He stands, his body feeling a hundred pounds heavier from the stress and the worry, and forces himself to grab a glass of orange juice from the fridge and the bottle of Tylenol from the bathroom.

Their breakfast is cold, but Bucky doubts Peter would be up for eating it, anyway, so he doesn’t bother bringing the boy’s plate over to him with the drink and the painkillers. Peter is still out cold, body practically steaming from how hot his skin is to the touch, and it’s another short eternity before Bucky is able to wake him enough to sit up and try and take the Tylenol.

“Peter, come on, just take this and you can go back to sleep, okay?” he says, holding the glass for Peter with one hand and cupping the boy’s weak fist holding the two small pills in the other, trying to urge him to lift them to his wobbly head. “Just take them, they’ll make you feel better.”

Peter slowly lifts his hand to his mouth, completely out of it, his eyes dull like he isn’t aware of anything at all around him. He sets the pills on his tongue, and sips from the glass when Bucky raises it for him, swallowing with a broken, pained groan.

He collapses back against the armrest, eyes closing immediately, as if just sitting up for those two minutes took all of his energy. Anxiety continues to flood Bucky as he sets the orange juice and the pill bottle on top of the barstool beside the loveseat, within reach, and then begins cleaning up from their uneaten breakfast, his own appetite completely gone.

He’s in the middle of washing the dishes when Peter abruptly gasps, loud and agonized, and Bucky turns around just in time to see the kid lurch off the couch and bolt for the bathroom. The barstool is knocked out of the way in Peter’s haste, sending the glass and the painkillers flying as it is. Bucky watches as broken glass and orange juice pool across their apartment floor as Peter’s sobbing, heaving sounds of throwing up echo from the bathroom.

Bucky has to un-tape the newspapers on the window so that he can open it and let the fresh, cool outside air into the apartment, still damp from the rain. Peter whines miserably as the air hits him, reaching desperately for his sleeping bag as Bucky takes it away.

“Peter, I told you, you’re way too hot for this right now. We need to cool you and this whole place down. Just bear with it, okay?”

“Can’t,” Peter sobs, curling up as tight as he can when he realizes Bucky won’t hand him his sleeping bag back. “Please, I’m—I’m s-so *cold.*”

Bucky merely shushes him, running a cool, wet cloth over his forehead, despite Peter weakly thrashing to escape from it. He soothingly rubs the kid’s back after, not knowing what else to do as he sits next to the loveseat on the floor, and Peter shifts his entire curled-up, shivering form closer to him and presses against Bucky’s side, seeking warmth.

With a small sigh, Bucky relents and leans further against the couch, letting Peter curl up against him, tears leaking from the kid’s tightly-shut eyes as he trembles from the cold and the pain. Helplessness consumes Bucky as he sits there, gently patting the boy’s back, petting his hair, one arm over him as Peter curls up beneath his arm and presses his fevered body into Bucky’s ribs.

“Are you hungry?” he quietly asks, but Peter shakes his head, just one quick, aborted nod. Frowning, Bucky turns and eyes the bottle of Tylenol beside him, nearly empty now, Peter not able

to keep a single pill down, not even just plain water.

Sharon's advice of getting the kid into a cool bath comes to mind, but apprehension stops him. Peter's already suffering so much from how cold he feels now, cuddled up against Bucky's warm body beside an open window in eighty degree weather. He can't imagine the discomfort he would feel if Bucky forced him into a tub of water that would probably feel like ice to his fevered body.

He files that option away as a last resort, right behind leaving Peter home alone so he can run out and buy some more medicine, and a thermometer, so he can see exactly what it is he's up against, here. But that option is also not ideal, because for the few minutes Peter has been awake every few hours all day long, he's not exactly been coherent enough for Bucky to explain where he'd be going and why, and besides, the kid is utterly helpless, not to mention defenseless. Bucky can't leave him alone, unless he absolutely has to.

Sighing again, Bucky allows himself to pull Peter's sleeping body a little more firmly against his side, eyes closing as he holds the boy there, wishing he had some way to ease his pain. A distant, angry part of himself deep down rages furiously at the unfairness of it all; if they had been regular people, Bucky could have taken him to a hospital, or a walk-in clinic, or hell—even if only *he* had been a regular person, he could take Peter right to the Avengers, to Steve, who probably have or know doctors that would be able to help an enhanced kid like Peter.

But he's not a regular person, and neither is Peter, and it's unfair but it's just the two of them, fighting against everything, even their own bodies, now, and when Peter needs his help, it's up to just him, everything riding on Bucky's shoulders, because he is the adult and this is the responsibility he took on, and he wouldn't give that—give *Peter*—up for anything, but right now, in this moment, Bucky is painfully, acutely aware of just how much weight is on his shoulders.

That train of self-pity is derailed violently when Bucky hears the familiar, rhythmic creak of the stairs that lead up to their balcony outside. He doesn't recognize the footsteps, but they—both of them—are unmistakably walking up to their front door, one behind the other.

Bucky pulls himself to his feet and quickly throws on his jacket, his glove and his hat, pulling it low, unsure of who could possibly be coming to their apartment. He's hesitant to open the door when there's a quiet-yet-firm knock, especially with Peter in this state—if this is an ambush or an attack, they're fucked, Peter can't even stand up like this—but Bucky has no way of knowing who might be on the other side, so squaring his shoulders, he tempts fate and opens the door.

And goes totally numb with surprise and shock when he sees Frank and Sharon standing there, hands full of shopping bags, which is eerily familiar, both looking grim and serious, though Sharon smiles sweetly at him when he meets her eyes.

"Heard your boy was sick," Frank says, while Bucky still struggles to find the words, any words.

"We thought we'd bring you a few things," Sharon adds, motioning to the bags she's holding. "Don't take this the wrong way, Jim, darling, but it sounded like you could use a little help on the phone this morning. And poor Frank was fretting all day."

Frank gives his wife a surly look, then glances over Bucky's shoulder, no doubt spying Peter on the loveseat across the room. "Doesn't look like he's feeling any better," the man remarks, gravely.

That does the trick of snapping Bucky out of his stupor, and he looks between the couple confusedly as he stutters, "I—yeah, he—he hasn't been able to keep any of the medicine down."

"Oh, no," Sharon exclaims, her face breaking into a worried frown as she tries to crane her neck to

see into the apartment. “Let’s see if we can’t get the sweet thing all fixed up, shall we?”

“May we?” Frank asks, gesturing to the door, and Bucky gives a quick, short nod as he steps inside, letting them enter. It feels—weird, and deeply foreign to have them here, in their home, completely different from seeing them at work, but oddly, he’s not so much nervous as he is grateful. Grateful that he isn’t completely alone in this, that someone else cares about Peter like he does, at least a little.

Sharon sets the bags on the counter and then immediately goes to kneel by Peter on the loveseat, feeling his face with her hands, which makes Peter gasp and flinch away from the cold feeling, her face scrunching with worry as he does. Frank glances around the still-mostly-barren room, polite enough not to voice the opinion that he’s showing very clearly on his face.

“Jim, there’s a thermometer in one of the bags on the counter, would you grab it, please?” Sharon asks, and Bucky is quick to open the bags, finding the thermometer nestled in amongst all sorts of other things—Gatorade, cans of soup, cups of Jell-O, something called “Nyquil,” more Tylenol, cough drops, a hot water bottle, a bottle of orange juice—more crap than Bucky ever would have even considered to grab if he’d gone to the store himself.

He brings the thermometer over to the woman, clearing his throat as he says, “You guys really went overboard, but, thanks. I… I really appreciate.”

Frank regards him quietly for a moment, then says, “We had our daughter young, and she was a real healthy kid, hardly even had a cold till she was four. Then one day, out of nowhere, bam—she’s down for two whole weeks with the flu. We were scared shitless, I’ll never forget it. Couldn’t sleep at all the whole time, worried she was gonna choke in her sleep, or have a seizure from how high her fever was. As a father, I’ll never forget how helpless I felt back then, and we —” he gestures to Sharon, then back to himself, “—we had each other, and my parents, and Sharon’s sister. We had people to help us get through it, and I don’t know where we’d be if we didn’t, ‘cause we were young and stupid and had no idea what to do. So consider this my paying it forward, Barnes. One father to another.”

Bucky opens his mouth to thank the man again, when a quiet, incessant beeping has him turning his attention back on Sharon, who is staring down at the thermometer in her hands with wide, panicked eyes. She quickly darts her head to look up at Bucky and says, “We need to get him to a hospital.”

“Why?” Bucky asks, feeling panic light up like fireworks inside his gut. “What does it say?”

“How high is it?” asks Frank as he steps closer to the loveseat, his expression darkening slightly as he glances at Peter’s delirious, sweat-soaked face.

“It’s 108,” says Sharon, her lips tightening into a distraught frown. “Jim, that’s high enough to cause brain damage. He needs medical attention.”

His jaw tightens as he grits his teeth, feeling his metal arm vibrate slightly from how hard he clenches his fist. He can’t take Peter to a hospital, even if he could afford to. That’s just not an option, without Peter ending up being taken away at best, and Bucky being found at worst.

“Have you tried getting him into a bath?” Frank asks, gazing at Bucky and seemingly picking up on his apprehension.

Bucky shakes his head, not taking his eyes off Peter’s sweltering, shivering form. “He’s been fighting me every step of the way, saying he feels cold. I didn’t want to try that unless I had no

other option."

"Well, your only other option is putting him in my truck so we can take him to the emergency room," Frank tells him, in a tone that's compassionate while also leaving no room for argument. "You gotta make a choice here, Jim. He's in bad shape."

Nodding slightly, Bucky glances between Peter and the foreboding tub in the bathroom behind him, dreading this, but knowing it's truly the only choice he has, now. "We'll give it a try."

Sharon stands and heads into the bathroom, giving Bucky a warm hand on the shoulder as she says, "I'll run it so you can feel how cool it needs to be, all right? You might have to do this a few times until he can keep the Tylenol down and his fever breaks."

"And once it does, you'll probably have to deal with the reverse problem; he'll feel warm, but you'll want to keep him feeling warmer so that he can sweat out whatever's wrong with him. As long as his fever is low-grade, make sure you keep him hot enough so his body gets rid of its toxins. Hot showers that steam up the bathroom are good for that," Frank adds.

Bucky nods along again, listening, until Sharon has the tub filled and ready. Bucky dips his hand in, finding the cool temperature actually quite pleasant in their warm apartment, though anxiety fills him again, knowing Peter won't feel the same way.

"Jim," Sharon says as he says goodbye to them at the door. "If his fever hasn't gone down by tonight, I want you to promise you will call us, all right? We'll help you get him some help."

He nods again, swallowing, steeling his features. "I promise."

Frank nods, clapping him on the shoulder. "If we don't hear from you tonight, you call us tomorrow morning, let us know how he's doing, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Good man," Frank says, sparing Peter one final glance as they head out the door. "Go take care of your boy. We'll talk to you soon."

"I will," Bucky says as he watches them leave. "Thanks again."

And then they're gone.

Bucky sighs, feeling his insides twist as he shuts the door, just him and Peter again, now, and the truly awful experience he's about to put them both through. Peter is practically comatose as Bucky bends down and tries to wake him, feeling his burning forehead with even more trepidation now that he knows just how bad his fever is.

"Peter," he says, whispering without meaning to, catching himself almost speaking too quietly to even wake the boy up. "Come on, kiddo, you need to get up. We gotta get you into the bath."

Peter groans as Bucky sits him upright, his eyes hardly opening as he allows himself to be pulled up, Bucky intending on helping him walk to the bathroom, but the boy's legs give out, no strength in them at all, so Bucky bends down and lifts Peter into his arms, carrying him the rest of the way without protest, as if Peter fell back asleep the moment he was allowed to be horizontal again.

The kid's not able to undress himself, so Bucky helps him out of his clothes, and then picks him up again so he can lower Peter into the tub without the kid falling and cracking his head open. What he expects is for Peter to groan and whine and cry as his feverish back hits the cold water.

But that's not what happens.

What happens is, Peter jolts like Bucky laid him on top of a live wire, flinching upward like the water shocked him, and then, with a desperation that completely floors Bucky, Peter shouts and lunges over his shoulder, trying to escape, to jump out of his arms and away from the water.

"Hey," Bucky says, grabbing Peter's clawing hands by his wrists and holding him still in his now-soaked lap, keeping the kid sequestered between him and the tub as Peter shivers violently in the sweltering room. "Kid, *relax.* I know it won't feel great, but we need to cool you down. It'll suck, but then it will all be over, okay? Just take a deep breath."

"No, no—" Peter pleads, voice so stricken with exhaustion and delirium that it's practically a mumble. "No, no I can't, it's too cold, I'll *die*—"

"If we don't bring your fever down, yeah, you will," he says, hating the words as they come out of his mouth, feeling his chest constrict at the implication of what he just said. "Peter, please, I'm begging you. Get in the tub."

"I can't," Peter sobs, leaning in against Bucky's chest, half-burrowing in his damp jacket, his whole body wracked with trembles.

Closing his eyes and tipping his head back, feeling his small, sick child shake fiercely in his arms, Bucky forces himself to take a deep breath, steels himself, and then lowers Peter into the tub again, pinning the boy's arms to his chest as he presses down on his shoulder, submerging him up to his neck.

Peter lets out a deafening, heartbreaking wail as the cool water envelopes him, tears immediately leaking down his flushed face as he tries to twist his body, kicking his legs out futilely, not strong enough in his weakened state to put up much resistance at all against Bucky's strength.

"I'm sorry," he says, his voice catching on a frustrated sob of his own that seems lodged in his throat, absolutely despising everything about this, the sight of his hands holding Peter down, of Peter's face soaked with tears, the sound of his desperate crying. Self-hatred and disgust flood inside of him like someone turned on the tap. Bucky ducks his head, anything to block out the sight of his kid's betrayed face.

*You're hurting him,* Bucky pleads at himself, viciously, wildly angry in spite of how hopeless he feels. *Stop it, anything would be better than this. Handing him over to the government would be better than this, or to Steve. Anything. Anything but this.*

But Bucky smothers that insidious voice, knowing it's right, but despising every word. *I can't,* he thinks, lowering his head fully against the rim of the tub, his hands still keeping Peter's sobbing body pinned in the cool water. *I have to take care of him. He needs me.*

Uselessness and frustration well up inside of Bucky. It isn't fair, none of it. What the hell is he supposed to do? Peter needs to go to the hospital and Bucky can't fucking take him, can't afford a goddamn doctor, anyway. He can't help the kid, can't do anything except hold his shivering, sobbing body down in a cold tub to try and break his fever, no way to help him without causing him pain.

And worse, he has no way of knowing what's wrong with Peter or how this happened. Is Peter even capable of getting a virus with his healing factor? Or is his body burning this hot *because* his healing factor is trying to fight something? Or, worse yet, could this be a result—or a symptom—of his mutation? Could the radiation be causing this? What would happen to Peter if a doctor found

out about it, never mind that he's been living with him? They would take Peter away, Bucky's cover would be blown, alerting Hydra or Steve or both—and then it would be all over.

But isn't that the better option if all Bucky can do is sit here, watching his kid suffer?

"I'm sorry," he says again to Peter, who is silent and half-conscious in the tub now, practically comatose save for the violent shivers still wracking his body. "I'm sorry, Peter, I know it hurts. It's almost over."

Peter doesn't say anything, most likely too consumed by the mind-numbing fever and agonizingly cool water to even comprehend Bucky's words. Bucky waits until he feels Peter's muscles loosen slightly—still taut with discomfort from the cold, but no longer actively trying to fight him—to ease up on his hold, leaning back and letting go of Peter's arms, his left hand slackening to a gentler, more comforting grasp on the boy's shoulder, helping keep his head upright.

"You're doing great, kid," Bucky whispers as he feels the boy's forehead, the side of his neck. He's still hot, disconcertingly so—but the water seems to have taken the bite out of his fever, at least a little.

But it doesn't get any better than that, and Bucky can only stand to see the kid like this for so long before he's lifting Peter out of the tub and drying him off. Peter falls back unconscious halfway through, so Bucky dresses him and lays him back down on the loveseat, and then sits beside him on the floor, running his hands through Peter's hair, praying and silently fighting back tears as he helplessly watches, powerless and alone.

By the time the sun has finished setting, Peter still hasn't woken up once since his bath, still hasn't eaten anything or kept any medicine down, and his fever has spiked back up to 108 three times, never dropping below 106.

Bucky doesn't move from his spot beside the loveseat the entire time. He lets Peter curl against his side, unable to bring himself to deny that comfort to the kid, but refuses to close the window or give him back his sleeping bag. Peter shivers constantly in his sleep, made worse by the sheen of sweat that refuses to go away, no matter how many times Bucky runs the cool, damp cloth over his fevered skin.

He doesn't call Frank and Sharon. Calling them would be the end of everything, and part of Bucky still has hope that this is just some odd fluke, some normal virus that Peter's body is going overkill trying to fight, or a weird symptom of the radiation that won't end up being anything more than a mild inconvenience. Bucky has no intention of getting anyone else involved, not as long as he can tend to Peter himself, and the boy's life isn't at risk.

But the night creeps by unbearably slowly, and as Bucky sits there in the quiet dark, watching Peter steadily get weaker and weaker, something instinctively desperate inside of him starts to fester. He's struggled with feeling like he has no right to be anywhere near Peter ever since the first night he met the kid, but now, alone in this stuffy apartment, completely helpless to do anything but *hope* Peter starts feeling better soon, Bucky is almost paralyzed by how much he feels like a failure.

He can't do anything for Peter. Maybe no one else could either, but at least a better person would be able to get him looked at, get him some pain relief, if nothing else. All Bucky can do is sit and wait, and watch, and hope, and run his hand through the kid's hair and shush him when the pain

makes him cry in his sleep. Bucky resigns himself to doing that all night long, determined to at least *be there,* in case that gives Peter any comfort at all, and finally, in the very early hours of the morning, Peter wakes—or, at least, his body does.

"Hey," Bucky says, quietly, smoothing Peter's bangs out of his face again. "How you feeling, kiddo?"

Peter blinks at him, slow, unfocused, his brown eyes look black in the dark room. He gazes at Bucky through half-lidded eyes, heavy and weary from the fever still, and squints at him like he's trying to recognize his face.

"Dad," Peter whispers, voice rough with disuse, unnatural compared to the high tones of his usual voice. Bucky tries giving him a small smile, feeling his forehead again, noting, pleasantly, that the boy is no longer shaking. "It's okay, Peter," he says softly, as he feels both sides of his neck with the back of his palm. "I'm right here."

Peter whimpers, tears pooling beneath his dark eyes as he takes a small, shuddering breath. "Hey, hey," Bucky immediately soothes, shushing him again when the kid starts to cry. "Pete, hey, you're all right, you're gonna be just fine."

"Dad," Peter says again, deliriously, looking at Bucky like he can't even see him, his vision completely out of focus. "Don't go. Don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere," he says, somewhat confused, trying to comfort the fevered, crying boy. "I'm not leaving, Peter, I'm staying right here with you, until you feel better."

Peter shakes his head, the tears falling faster, flooding down his cheeks. "Don't," he begs, closing his eyes as the tears continue to fall. "Please, Dad, don't go."

He lifts his small, trembling hand, finds the hem of Bucky's shirt, and grabs it with a weak, pale fist, tugging him closer without a shred of strength behind it.

"Don't get on the plane."

Bucky pulls back, sharply, his breath catching as he watches Peter's eyes slowly open, looking straight at him without seeing him. Peter reaches for him again, blindly, whimpering when Bucky pulled away. "Dad—don't go, don't leave me here—"

"I'm not leavin' you," Bucky whispers, without really hearing it, his head spinning from the realization that Peter's merely having a fever dream, that he's not feeling better at all, probably doesn't even know who Bucky *is,* right now. He gently wraps his arms around the kid, holding him as Peter lays beside him, his body and mind going on autopilot as the frustration and hopelessness crushes him once again. "I love you. I'm not going anywhere."

But Peter's already fallen back asleep, the tears drying on his hot skin, his body no longer shaking as Bucky embraces him in his arms, moving them away from the small, cramped loveseat and onto the mattress instead, screw it—if this is the only thing he can do to make Peter feel better, if this is the only thing he has the power to give the kid, then fine—he'll hold him for as long as Peter wants, fever be damned.

He still isn't able to fall asleep, too wired from checking Peter's temperature what feels like every fifteen minutes, from wiping the kid's face down with his washcloth, checking his breathing, jolting awake with every small movement, thinking the kid is waking or seizing or worse.

Bucky reaches his breaking point at sunrise.

Peter isn't getting better, his fever won't stay down. He can't keep his eyes open for more than a few minutes at a time, and he still hasn't eaten or drunk anything, much less kept any medicine down. The exhaustion and frayed nerves finally become too much, and Bucky goes to roll over and grab his cellphone, desperate to call *someone*—Frank, an ambulance, fuck, he would call Steve at this point if it meant getting his child some help—but when he pulls away from Peter, the boy groans, turns over and slowly opens his eyes, waking.

His brows furrow slightly, and then he looks up at Bucky with his tired but clear eyes, gazing directly at him, seeing him.

"Dad," he mumbles sleepily, his voice still too rough, but much more like himself, softer.

"Hey, kid," Bucky says as he leans down, habitually pressing the back of his hand to the side of Peter's neck. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere."

Peter hums sleepily, cuddling into Bucky's pillow, then looks back up at him and tiredly says, "I feel pretty hot," as a small smile crosses his face. "And I'm really hungry."

A laugh startles its way out of Bucky, and he drops the cellphone instantly without a care, relief crashing over him in the best of ways, making him almost lightheaded from the force of it.

"Then let's get some food into you," he says, smiling helplessly, not caring about the wetness threatening to drip from his eyes, down his cheeks, finally not feeling useless, for the first time in what feels like the longest day of his entire life.

Chapter End Notes

And with this chapter... the fun begins. I'm sure you all know where this is going already, hahaha.

Thank you for reading!!

# The Truth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even though Bucky's the one who made the decision, it still surprises him just how easily he and Peter fall into their new normal.

After the incident of the fever, the rest of summer floats by fairly smoothly. Peter and Bucky adapt to their mismatched schedules—Peter usually working with Delmar in the evenings, while Bucky is home—so the kid takes to coming during the day and visiting him at work, which neither Bucky nor his bosses mind.

In fact, Frank, though he tried to be nonchalant about it, had raised Bucky's weekly wage after seeing their apartment, although he never admitted that that was the reason why. Bucky didn't complain when the man had handed him an extra hundred the first week after Peter had been sick; after all, the more money they save, the better shape they'll be in when the other shoe drops.

But nothing major had really come of the bus incident; not yet, anyway. The local news had covered it—newspapers and televisions and online blogs, according to Ned—but most of the articles focused on the actual heroics, not the awkward hug afterward, though Peter assured him the videos were still permanently floating around online, which means the potential threat is permanent, too.

They'd spent quite a bit of time once Peter was well again making sure their escape plan was airtight. Two bugout bags now lay hidden beneath the floor in their kitchen instead of one, and the maps are drawn and marked and plotted, every necessity packed, but lightly enough that they aren't weighed down, their rendezvous locations picked, their plan rehearsed and drilled into both their heads, along with backup plans B through D.

That had been one side of their new normal, preparing for the fallout of the bus incident. The other side had been adapting to Bucky's boss's newfound interest in his personal life.

It'd been Bucky's decision, but Peter had been more than eager to go along with it—it wasn't entirely new, anyway, just more real, now, now that they had spoken of it out loud. Peter's face had gone slightly red, but he nodded obediently, understanding the necessity of becoming habituated to referring to Bucky as his dad.

Bucky, likewise, had become used to referring to Peter as his son, even in private. The more accustomed to the idea they become, the less likely they'll be to slip up in front of the Descartes or Delmar or Ned, or whoever they meet when the time comes to move on. It'd been an awkward thing to ask of Peter, but the boy understood his reasoning, and didn't hesitate to stop calling him "Bucky" altogether.

Which is exactly what surprises him, even now, as the heat of summer bleeds into cooler weather, rain falling most days, the sky filling up with clouds and replacing the blazing sun he'd grown used to. It still surprises him every time Peter says it, how easily the name falls from his lips, how his expression doesn't change at all when he looks up at Bucky as he comes through the door and says, "Welcome home, Dad."

Bucky smiles, just as surprised with himself, how he doesn't even pause before he's ruffling the boy's hair and answering, "Hey, kiddo. How's your night off going?"

“Kind of bored,” he says, leaning back on the wobbly stool, steadying himself, his hands gripping the countertop. “I’ve been scrapbooking all day like a lonely grandma.”

“Well, scrapbooking *is* what you’re supposed to do on rainy days,” Bucky says as he glances at the page of photos Peter’s assembled—most of them old, from his life long before they met, but some of them are newer, two in particular that stand out; the ones Sharon had recently taken.

The first is of Peter sitting behind the wheel of a junky old Dodge, Frank leaning on the window and pointing at the dashboard, instructing him, smiling a little as Peter raptly stares where the man is directing, his attention stuck. The other is of Bucky and Peter, Bucky’s cap pulled a little lower than usual when Sharon pulled the camera out, his hands in the engine of a car while Peter leans against the bumper, gazing up at Bucky with that familiar, deeply affectionate look in his big, dark eyes.

Bucky loves that photo, loves that Peter wants to preserve it, but its existence makes him almost dizzy with anxiety.

“Pete,” he says reluctantly, tone gentle as he puts a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You shouldn’t… keep that one.”

Peter glances at the photo quickly, then back up to Bucky, his face pleading. “But, you—you can hardly even see your face in it, your hat’s in the way—please? It’s the only one I have of you and me. I love this photo.”

Bucky sighs, his hand squeezing Peter’s shoulder comfortingly. “I do too, but someone who’s looking for me could recognize me easily, and then they’d know your face, too. It’s too risky.”

“But…” Peter protests, picking the picture up and holding it against his chest, protectively, like he’s scared Bucky will take it from him. “What if I keep it in my wallet? So it’s always on me?”

Bucky sighs, knowing it’s a bad idea, *knowing* he should tell Peter no.

But he’s as powerless in front of those puppy-dog eyes as he’s always been.

“You don’t let anyone else see it, you understand?” he says, keeping his voice stern. “Even if you have to destroy it to make sure.”

Peter’s face twists, but he nods acceptingly and says, “I promise.”

“Good.” He gives him a fond pat on the shoulder, then nods his head toward the loveseat. “Why don’t you move this to the couch so I can start dinner?”

Peter’s face lights up. “I wanna help!” he says as he stands, clearing off the counter hurriedly so they can continue their nightly tradition of making dinner together, the scrapbooking forgotten.

Identity is a strange thing.

Bucky has suffered from not having one—or, rather, from having one he didn’t choose and would never want—for long enough to know that life can be a tough thing to navigate without an identity you’re proud of, one you want to protect. He’s lived life in limbo, moment to moment, without any goal or desire except *survive,* and that’s all you’re capable of, without an identity. Without any sense of self.

He hadn't lived free from Hydra long enough to finish building a new one when Peter came along. He hadn't made it past the stage of pure, instinctual survival before he suddenly had a child in his home, needing his attention, needing to be fed, protected, loved. He hadn't yet finished rebuilding *Bucky* before he was suddenly someone else, someone completely new and foreign—*Dad.* And that's the strange thing about identities; how they constantly grow and change, how they're molded by the experiences we live through.

Bucky had been so obsessively determined to become his own person, whoever that may be. To be a human being and not a weapon, to find who he is, discover himself. It was a need he didn't have time to focus on over the last year, too preoccupied with the necessities, with finding food, shelter, money. But it kept him up at night, on bad days when he couldn't get out of his own head, when he was trapped in the void that was his identity-less existence desperately screaming, *who am I?* Only to have the name "Bucky" echoed back at him, until the word was hollow.

And then Peter came along.

And suddenly, the name *Bucky* wasn't hollow anymore. It was him. When Peter would call out to him, Bucky would be filled with the dumbstruck realization of, *that's me. He means me. I'm Bucky,* until being called by his own name was normal again, familiar. It made him feel safe, Peter calling his name. It was the security of having his identity back.

But identities change, and it's strange to Bucky how easy it was to forego *Bucky* entirely—this thing he had desperately wanted for so long—and trade it for *Dad,* without batting an eye, without so much as a shred of doubt. He'd been so obsessed with leaving *Asset* behind. Now, all he can think about is how right *Dad* feels.

Especially in moments like these, when Peter is dead tired from the extra training Bucky has put him through, pouting and sagging against the park bench with a long, groaning "Daaaad," that makes Bucky want to laugh from the sheer ridiculousness of how pitiful he sounds. "My legs are *killing* me."

"Come on, kid, it wasn't even that long of a run. How are you so sore already?"

"Dunno," Peter says, wincing as he tries to stretch his legs out. "They hurt all the time lately. It's really annoying."

A thought strikes Bucky, and he gives Peter a surprised look. "Maybe it's growing pains."

Peter blinks at him, owlishly. "You think?" he asks, forcing himself to stand up, despite his obvious discomfort. "Am I—am I taller? I don't feel any taller."

"Let's see," Bucky says, taking Peter's shoulders in his hands and facing him, his only reliable source of measuring the boy's height by comparing it to his own. He straightens his metal hand out and lays it flat on top of Peter's head, surprised when his hand reaches just below his heart. "Well I'll be damned."

"Am I bigger?"

"You're practically a giant," Bucky says, grinning, ruffling Peter's hair. "Do you remember how little you were when we met? You were only this big." He lowers his hand down to just above his bellybutton.

Peter's eyes widen in disbelief. "Really?"

"Yeah, kid, really. God, I can't believe it, how did I not notice you sprouting up like a weed?"

Peter grins, mischievous and a little proud. “I’m gonna be taller than you someday.”

“At this rate? Probably,” Bucky says, then frowns down at him. “Kidding aside, don’t. If you grow taller than me I will lose my shit.”

Peter laughs, his sweat-damp curls bouncing from the force of it. He’ll need a haircut soon. “Okay. In that case, maybe I’ll stay just a little shorter. Just for you.”

“My hero,” Bucky smiles, and Peter leans into his side as they begin walking home, his narrow shoulder a familiar and necessary comfort beneath Bucky’s arm.

The strangest thing about identities is how they come to you, sometimes welcomed, often not. Bucky had no say in being the Winter Soldier, had no choice in being given that identity, but the same is true now, of being given the identity of Peter’s dad. He didn’t choose that either, and yet, it’s *him,* in a way that the Fist of Hydra never was; a whole and consuming rightness that fills and completes him to his very core. The Winter Soldier identity was nothing but a mask Hydra forced him to wear. This, now, being Peter’s dad—this is the identity he *found,* the one he discovered.

The one *Peter* discovered, when he found him, though Bucky had been the one looking.

The cold, bracing breeze of a cloudy autumn night rolls over Bucky and Peter like mist over a moor. The city is quiet—quiet for Queens, anyway—and the rooftop is especially frigid as Peter dons his mask and ridiculous goggles, preparing for his nightly patrol.

Bucky observes him, watching as Peter adjusts his uniform, the amateur stitching they added when Peter’s arms and legs began to outgrow the sleeves standing out garishly. Bucky had checked out an old, falling-apart book from the library on how to patch clothing, and they’d done it together, repurposing an old shirt Peter had outgrown completely into patches to extend the sleeves and legs of his Spider-Man “suit.” It looks silly, but Peter’s identity is preserved, and that’s the important thing.

He takes in his odd posture as Peter secures his web-shooters. The boy’s been quiet—relatively, that is—and he seems particularly high-strung this evening, his shoulders tight and muscles twitching as he prepares to swing off the rooftop. Bucky’s expression tightens as he thinks back to the fever of a couple months ago; worried Peter is starting to feel unwell again, the thought of having to relive that awful day turning his stomach.

“Hey,” Bucky calls gently, grabbing Peter’s attention before he can lift his arm to swing away. “You feelin’ all right, kiddo?”

“Huh?” says Peter, caught off guard, as though he didn’t understand the question. “Oh, uh, yeah. I’m okay. Just feel kind of anxious, is all.”

“I can tell,” Bucky says. “What’s up? Is this regular-anxiety, or spider-anxiety? Something happen at school?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Peter sighs, looking back and forth between Bucky and the cityscape of Queens. “I don’t really know? I’m hoping checking things out will make me feel better. It’s not even that bad, honestly. Just… haven’t felt like this in a really long time.”

“You want to go home, we’ll go home,” Bucky says, reaching over and patting him reassuringly on the shoulder. “And if you need to patrol a little longer tonight until you feel better, that’s fine, too. It is Friday night, after all.”

“Okay,” Peter says, and Bucky can hear the smile in his voice beneath his mask. “I don’t think I want to be out long, though. Can we get McDonalds on the way home?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to pump all that crap into you if you’re already feeling anxious,” he says, putting on his best “tough dad” face. “*But,* it has been a while since we went out, so if you’re feeling better after your patrol, then yeah, we can.”

“Woohoo!” Peter cheers, straightening up on the ledge and stretching his arms one final time before he says, “In that case, I’ll be back before you know it!”

“Be safe,” Bucky calls after him, watching Peter leap from the building with a falsely-cheerful, “I will!” that doesn’t convincingly hide the underlying anxiety Bucky can still hear in the kid’s voice.

He watches until Peter swings out of sight. Queens seems peaceful enough tonight; only the occasional siren, short-lived and far away. Traffic is slowly thinning, and Bucky leans over the rooftop ledge and observes the world around him, his own anxiety bubbling low in his stomach, stemming off of Peter’s.

He trusts his kid. He trusts his instincts, trusts that he’ll be safe if he gets in over his head. He also trusts his abilities, and not just because he’s spent the last several months training him every single day—Peter is formidable, and resourceful, and he told Bucky he would be safe and Bucky trusts that he will be.

But still. Peter seems naturally pulled in the direction of danger, by instinct or by fate, it doesn’t matter—something always brings him to the lurking alleyway predators and runaway buses of the world, and it grates on Bucky constantly, knowing he can’t be there every minute of every day to protect his kid, knowing that some of the danger Peter will inevitably face will be *his* fault, following Bucky just as closely as it follows Peter, the threats that cling to both of them like shadows.

Peter will run head-first into danger and Bucky can’t stop him, just like he can’t stop Peter from one day having to face the danger that will eternally be at Bucky’s heels. It’s the life they’ve chosen, and nights like these are just a small part of the price they have to pay for becoming a family; the occasional anxious night when the danger seems to be looming overhead, in exchange for the life he’s built with the child who has become his son. The life they’ve built together.

He thinks back to the plans they’ve made, the maps they’ve drawn in case they’re separated. All their rendezvous points and contingency plans. It doesn’t feel like enough, even though Bucky knows he’s prepared Peter as much as he possibly could. He lets himself drift to the thoughts he usually tries to stay away from, the unproductive kind, the sweet kind that feel so good when he has them and so painful when he lets them go—thoughts of a different life.

He can picture it, though it’s impossible. He can picture what it would have been like if there had been no Hydra, no radioactive spider. Him and Peter living in a bigger, clean apartment with plumbing that he doesn’t have to fix every single day and a fridge that’s quieter than the metro line. Windows that they wouldn’t have to tape up because they wouldn’t need to hide. Teaching Peter to drive, actually being able to drive the kid to school himself. Camping trips, not looking over his shoulder constantly every time he leaves the house.

He imagines living outside the city limits, in a huge old farmhouse like the one he dreams about sometimes, timelessly beautiful on more land than they’d know what to do with. They could grow their own food, Peter could have a dog. God, how happy the kid would be if he could live that life; how happy Bucky would be if he could give it to him. He pictures teaching Peter how to fix up old cars, owning his own mechanic shop like the one he runs for Frank. He pictures teaching the kid

better things than how to break out of choke-hold, Peter having no need of that knowledge at all, Bucky having no need of it.

They can have pieces of that life, he knows. Pieces of a peaceful life, that's all they get, and he's grateful for it, even if sometimes all he wants to do is close his eyes and imagine being able to be the father that Peter actually deserves, giving him all the things he wants Peter to have every single time he looks at him.

It's as he's wondering exactly when the other shoe will drop that it does. He feels the presence before he hears it; hears the footsteps before he turns and looks.

Peter is the one who felt it coming, but the danger arrives for Bucky first.

"I can't believe it's actually you," the man says. Bucky knows his voice, but not his face, at least not the way it is now, half of it completely covered in grotesque burns. "We thought you'd be halfway across the world by now."

*We,* Bucky's mind echoes, his blood running cold until it matches the frigid temperature of his metal arm. *Hydra.* He knew it, knew this man was no civilian, even if he's dressed like one, holding out his arms as he walks across the rooftop after pulling a cellphone from his pocket. Bucky is so tense he can feel his muscles straining.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw the video," the man says, gesturing to his raised phone, even though the screen is blank. "Only saw your face in profile and thought, nah, there's no way he'd be stupid enough to stay here after the Triskelion shit went down. But I had to be sure."

Bucky doesn't move as the man approaches. He assesses him, looking for any signs of a concealed weapon, or worse yet, an ambush. It seems outrageous that a Hydra agent would confront him, alone, unarmed, but the smug grin on the man's face outweighs Bucky's expectations, so he waits, caught between making a break for it and subduing the man before he can call for backup.

"I can't tell you how many times I watched that video while thinking to myself, there is no way in *hell* I'm watching the asset *hug* some vigilante punk kid. But color me surprised, Soldier, here I am waiting on rooftops in the freezing cold for Spider-Man to show up for *weeks,* and when I finally spot him, there you are. I can't believe my damn luck. Or your stupidity. Did you really think we wouldn't look for you?"

*Jesus, this guy never shuts up.* "No," he says. "And I don't think you came alone, either."

"Yeah, well," the man says with a shrug, still grinning. "Call me overconfident, but this is an opportunity I just couldn't pass up. You see, I more-or-less got demoted after DC. Bosses weren't exactly thrilled that I couldn't protect Pierce." The smugness drops from his face, and his eyes go almost unnervingly cold. "But I don't have to tell *you* that Hydra doesn't tolerate failure."

Bucky barely manages to suppress the shiver that tries to run up his back.

"So they left me out here, told me my new mission was to scour every *inch* of the east coast until I found you. And if I didn't find you, well, I'd better get used to the smell of garbage, because this is where I'd be staying, and I could kiss my position of handler goodbye."

Beneath the scars and burns, the man's eyes light up, an expression of manic glee taking over his face. "And now here you are. And after I bring you in, I'll finally be able to get out of this glorified trash heap."

Bucky's eyes narrow, defensive and incredulous all at once. "You really think you can take me

down by yourself?"

The man's smile widens. Bucky feels a sharp, biting panic spear him down the middle.

"I'm not *really* by myself though, am I?" he says, cryptically. "It's two against one."

Bucky doesn't have time to search for a second opponent before understanding crashes over him. He turns to vault over the ledge, but the man is fast—*enhanced*-fast. He grabs Bucky by the back of his jacket, and he's forced to turn and block an incoming blow to the back of his head. His attacker opens his grinning mouth and says, in horridly-fluid Russian, "*Longing.*"

An uncontrollable tremor wracks Bucky's body, and he grits his teeth so hard that his jaw aches as he rears back and punches the man *hard* across the face with his metal fist. The man staggers, blooding spilling from his grinning mouth, and he lunges to deliver his own blow that Bucky narrowly dodges as he half-shouts, "*Rusted!"*

The man swings again, and Bucky can't maneuver out of the way in time as his knees buckle, a wash of painfully-cold dread consuming him. He cries out in pain, but not from the blow—his head throbs agonizingly as a blinding whiteness begins seeping from the edges, whiting out his ability to think—

"*Furnace.*"

Bucky shouts, gathering all his strength, his rage, his desperation. He forces himself off the ground and charges at the man—if he can just shut him up, he can get away—he has to get away, he has to get home, has to get home to—to—

*Peter…*

He drives his fist as hard as he can into the other man's stomach, and the guy sputters on his next word as he's sent flying backward. Bucky wastes no time and bolts for the ledge as fast as he can, but his legs give out and he hits the ground hard as the man spits and viciously screams, "*Daybreak!"*

*No,* Bucky desperately thinks, begging himself. *No, don't, don't let him—get up, get up, you have to get* up—

He lets out a piercing, enraged scream as the man stands over him and says, "*Seventeen,*" which earns him a forceful stomp to the back of his head, muffling his screams as his face is smashed into the concrete.

"No!" Bucky shouts, anger and fear filling him, everything else gone, his mind blank, just white white *white.* "Stop it!"

He can hear the man grinning through the smugness of his voice. "*Benign.*"

*Please,* he cries into the blinding white void, feeling his body surrender, in spite of himself. *Not again, not again, not again—*

"*Nine,*" the man says, and Bucky screams his desperation as loud as he can, barely able at the last second to stop himself from screaming Peter's name. "*Homecoming.*"

*Peter,* he thinks, desperately, everything else fading out. *Peter. Peter…*

*Son.*

"*One.*"

He feels the inky black tendrils pull him under. The man opens his mouth to speak, the final word hanging from his victorious mouth. He braces himself, but all he hears is a surprised shout of pain.

And then hands on his back. Small, gentle hands, trembling, frantic—

"Bucky!" A voice. A desperate, watery voice. He knows that voice. "Bucky, please, Bucky get up, oh my God—"

He tries to lift himself off the ground, every muscle in his body protesting. His mind is white, he can't think at all, all of it covered up like snow.

"Bucky, come on, we gotta *go*—"

"You must be Spider-Man," says another voice, cold and grating. "*Fr*—"

He can feel the scream leave his throat, but it's not his voice he hears. It's another one, softer, younger, just as desperate. "Stop it!" screams the familiar voice. The hands leave his back, the body moves away. "Leave him alone!"

Pushing as hard as he can against the ground, he manages to lift himself onto his hands and knees. He can hear the struggle behind him, a chorus of strikes and blows and the sounds of bodies hitting pavement. He turns over, trying to see through the haze, the impenetrable whiteness of his mind.

A child and a man.

The child is fast, but so is the man, and every punch and kick the kid dishes out, the man returns, twice as hard. "Sorry, kid," he says, delivering a kick to the boy that sends him flying into the unforgiving concrete ledge. "But you have something that belongs to me."

The child gasps and hisses in pain beneath his red mask. "He *doesn't,*" he says, getting to his feet. "You're not taking him!"

The man smirks, an unsightly look that makes his stomach turn. "You think so?" He turns and looks at him, opens his mouth to speak. Fear billows inside of him and he desperately covers his ears, trying to block it out.

"No!" the child shouts again, lifting his hand and shooting a white thread from his wrist that sticks to the man, which he then tugs on, sending him flying into the rooftop's door. The man crumples with a cry of pain, and the kid uses the moment to run back over to him, frantically urging, "Come on, Bucky, come on." The child reaches out to him, tries to sling his arm over his narrow shoulders. His body feels too heavy to lift himself off the ground. The child wraps his other arm around his back and pulls him up, effortlessly. "We gotta go, come on!"

The kid's head snaps up suddenly, and he pushes him out of the way and back down to the ground as the man charges at them, barreling into the child and knocking him down to the concrete, too. The man punches the child hard across the face, then wraps his hands around his throat before he can recover and says, "Just for that, I'm going to have him kill you *so* slowly."

The child struggles, trying to rip the man's hands off of his neck. He sputters and coughs, his fingers trembling as he tugs uselessly on the man's wrists. "No—" he coughs. "Don't, don't—"

"Aww, are you having a hard time breathing?" the man taunts, and removes one of his hands to grab the hem of the kid's mask instead. "Here, let me help you." And he pulls it up and off the

boy's face, goggles and all, and tosses it away.

The man studies the kid's face, then hums and says, "This your type, Soldier?" He looks at him. "Maybe I'll let you have some fun with him one last time before you slit his throat."

He shudders. A flare of—something—rage?—rises up in him and bursts. He lifts himself up, forces himself, though his whole body feels as heavy and inflexible as stone.

The child tries to take advantage of the man looking away from him and aims to punch him square across the jaw, but the man is quicker, and he catches the boy's wrist before it can make contact and slams it down on the ground. "You just don't want to make this easy for yourself, do you?"

"I won't—" the child coughs. He glares defiantly at the man above him. "Won't… let you… hurt him…!"

The man smiles. He feels that same burst of rage soar up inside of him again, and he forces himself to stand on shaking legs.

"Gonna be hard to stop me," the man says, grinning widely. "After I do *this*."

The man wrenches on the boy's wrist in his hand and breaks it with a deafening *snap*. The child screams, loud, long and blood-curdling, and it cuts through the thick white haze clouding his mind as sharply as if he had felt the pain himself. He's moving before he realizes it, tackling the man to the ground and then pummeling him for all he's worth, landing brutal blow after brutal blow. The man tries to speak, tries to get the godforsaken words out, but he doesn't relent and smashes his metal fist into his face again and again, venting every shred of rage and helplessness within him, hits him and hits him until the man's body goes lax.

He knows he'll kill him if he doesn't stop, but he doesn't stop, too consumed by the blinding whiteness in his head, now filled with the unbearable sound of that child screaming, louder than anything he's ever heard, overwriting everything else. He raises his hand again, intending on hitting the man's face until it breaks apart into pieces, but two arms wrap around it before he can deliver the blow and pull him back, off the man's unconscious body entirely.

The child kneels next to him, face wet with tears as he clings to his metal arm and begs, "Don't, please, please don't kill him." They're both gasping for breath, and he curls in on himself and stares down at the ground, trying to block the screaming out, but it's all he can hear, until he isn't even sure if it's the child beside him or if the sound is entirely in his head. He grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut, and then a small hand is gently cupping the side of his head and a quiet voice says, "Hey, hey, Bucky, look at me. Look at me."

The hand against his head trembles, and he feels the body next to him move in close, kneeling between his own knees dug into the concrete, a soft voice gently pleading, "Please, Bucky, look at me."

He feels a forehead press against his own, hears another heartbroken plea. "Look at me…" The hand falls to his shoulder, he feels drops of water fall and land on his metal hand. "Look at me, Dad…"

Bucky looks up, his head lifting until he can clearly see Peter's face, bruised, battered, utterly soaked in tears. Peter looks up at him and sobs brokenly when their eyes finally meet, letting himself collapse into Bucky's chest, cradling his broken wrist between their bodies.

"Oh, God, Peter, Peter—" Bucky gasps, shooting up and taking the boy by the shoulders so he can

put enough distance between them to look at him. “Fuck, Peter, hey, let me see—”

But Peter shakes his head, refusing to lift it, crying openly as Bucky fusses around him and tries to take stock of every injury he can see, his eyes drifting back to the boy’s swollen wrist again and again. “Peter—shit, I’m so sorry—I know it hurts, you gotta let me see—”

The kid shakes his head again, his sobs worsening until his entire body is wracked with them. Bucky’s never seen him cry like this before; never seen him so consumed by the tears that he'd completely refused to speak. He takes the boy into his arms and tries to soothe him, tries to calm him down enough that he can inspect his injuries, but Peter pulls back, sobs scarcely dying down.

“He—” he tries, coughing from the bruises around his throat and the sobs still trying to bubble up as he speaks. “He was—”

Bucky gently pats him on the back, soothing his blood-soaked curls out of his face with his other hand. Peter gulps down big mouthfuls of air as he tries to quell his sobs, until Bucky has to take the boy’s face in his hands and say, “Come on, baby, deep breaths. There you go. Slowly…”

“He was—” Peter says again, softer now. He sniffles and looks up at Bucky finally, fat tears rolling down his cheeks as their eyes meet and he whispers, terrified, “He was gonna take you away…”

He pulls Peter flush against his chest and holds him, knowing he’s squeezing too tight and not caring. He doesn’t want Peter to see the same terrified, heartbroken look on his own face, wants his child to feel safe and protected in his arms, when really he isn’t, isn’t safe with Bucky at all.

“We need to get you home,” he says after a while, when Peter’s crying has stopped and he’s gone limp in Bucky’s lap. “I need to take a look at you, and we gotta prepare in case this guy told anyone about us.”

“What about him?” Peter asks, his voice sounding as hoarse and battered as his throat looks.

Bucky turns and spares the man a spiteful glance, uncaring for the red accumulation of broken and bloodied skin that used to be his scarred face. He’ll die of his injuries if they leave him like this.

But Peter wouldn’t want that.

“Can you walk? I’ll drop him off outside a hospital and then take you home, but I can’t carry both of you at the same time.”

Peter nods, wiping his wet face off with his unbroken hand as he shakily gets to his feet. “Uh huh.”

They end up leaving the man behind a parked ambulance in the ER parking lot of the nearest hospital, safe enough outside the range of the security cameras, but close enough that the paramedics will see him when they return to their truck. Peter insists that they wait on the neighboring rooftop until someone sees him and wheels him into the hospital, but thankfully it isn’t long before Bucky can finally put his arm around his kid and take him home.

Peter doesn’t say anything as they make their way home, and Bucky assumes it’s from the trauma to his throat and the pain no doubt throbbing in his wrist. It isn’t until they're safely back home and the door is shut and locked that he finds out the real reason why Peter hasn’t said anything the entire way here.

“What…” he starts, voice broken and cracking and filled with pain. “What… happened to you, back there? What did he… what did he do to you?”

Bucky goes very still, gritting his teeth as he debates whether he should tell Peter the truth or not. He knows he has the right to know. But he also knows that if Hydra were to find out that Peter knew about the Winter Soldier, the next time they decided to kill him wouldn’t be on a whim.

“Peter,” he sighs, hating the unsureness of his own voice, hating the words even more. “You know I can’t tell you that. Please… please try to understand.”

The boy is quiet for a long, tense moment, then whispers, “I *don’t* understand,” the tears evident in his voice. Bucky turns quickly and is struck by the frustrated, almost *angry* look on the kid’s face, staring dejectedly down at the floor with heavy tears streaming down his cheeks. “I don’t understand *any* of it. What did he want? What did he mean when he said you were gonna kill me?”

Bucky flinches, unable to stop himself from violently recoiling at the thought. The memory of what that guy said and did is hazy to him at best, right up until he broke Peter’s wrist and pulled Bucky from his trance, but he doesn’t doubt that that guy would threaten Peter with making Bucky torture and kill him. He’d expect nothing less from an agent of Hydra.

He swallows the guilt and despair that fills his chest, and ushers Peter over to the loveseat as he says, “I need to look at your wrist before it heals too much for me to splint it, okay?”

The disappointment and frustration is clear as day on Peter’s face, but he nods his head agreeably and lets Bucky examine and treat his wounds, though he stays silent and reserved for the rest of the night.

He dreams of the farmhouse.

It’s a huge old house that he knows inside and out, though every room is entirely too big, no way they could all fit inside this one building. He moves from room to room, up and down staircases that always lead to the same hallway, searching, searching, searching and he doesn’t know why.

The wooden floors creak and groan under his feet.

At last he opens a door, an old, dilapidated door that screeches from unoiled hinges as he pushes it open. There’s a familiar room inside, but he knows it doesn’t *fit,* it’s not right. He walks through the doorway between the farmhouse to the apartment on the other side, and knows this isn’t the way he meant to go.

He looks across the room at the small, familiar kitchen; the old appliances, the standalone counter and wobbly barstool. He looks at the barren loveseat and the even more barren mattress on the floor, kids’ books and movies and clothes piled all around them, in every corner of the room. He knows this place. But he also knows it shouldn’t be here.

He tries to leave, but opening the front door only leads to the same apartment, like stepping into a mirror. He goes back and forth between the doorway, desperate, looking for a way out, a way back to the farmhouse, but it’s hopeless, hopeless, hopeless. He opens the door over and over again, but the world doesn’t exist, just this same apartment, the only thing on the other side.

And then he steps inside, and there he is, finally. He feels relief overflow within him when he finally sees Peter, lying there on the loveseat, content and sound asleep. Bucky moves forward quietly, smiling down at the boy and crouching by the loveseat so he can reach out and pull the

sleeping bag over the boy's prone form, covering him.

But suddenly, a hand shoots out, and it grabs his metal wrist in an unbreakable grip. Bucky reels back, but the metal of his arm starts to bend, and he looks and is horrified to see that the hand holding his is broken grotesquely as well, the wrist jagged and crooked like the bone was snapped in half and never healed right.

Bucky tries to tug himself free, but his hands end up wrapped around a small, pale throat, and he pulls back but they won't *come off,* no matter how desperately he yanks on them, powerless to do anything but watch as his fingers squeeze, as they tighten, harder, harder, *harder—*

He screams, desperate and hysteric. *No,* he begs into the white world all around him, an endless void of it, just him and this slender throat in his hands that he can't let go of. *No, please, don't make me do it, DON'T MAKE ME DO IT—*

He feels arms circle around him, helping to try and pull him off the throat, but he can't see them, nothing in this white abyss except him. The arms tighten and squeeze, and then his screams slowly morph and turn into a name, repeated urgently and pleadingly all around him, filling his head, until no other sound exists. *Bucky, Bucky, Bucky—*

"Bucky!"

He gasps and jerks awake, trying to sit up, but the arms around him pull him back down into someone's lap and he thrashes, disoriented. Two slender hands pin his shoulders down as a familiar voice begs, "It's okay, Bucky, it's okay, it's me—Dad, it's *me!"*

Bucky goes still, chest heaving and skin soaked in sweat. He looks up, sees Peter's worried, upside-down face staring back at him, eyes wide and concerned as he hugs Bucky from behind with trembling hands.

"Peter," Bucky pants, reality seeping back to him as he lifts Peter's hands off his shoulders. "What are you doing, you shouldn't be putting any pressure on your wrist—"

"You were thrashing," Peter says, voice still laden with fear. "And—freaking out, I didn't know if —I didn't know what else to do."

Bucky sits up and looks at him, and his throat closes up at the sight. *His neck.* He chokes at the sight of Peter's neck, horribly discolored in the dark, like someone covered his skin in black handprints. *That wasn't me,* he screams desperately at himself, but it's too late—the image is stuck, burned into his mind; the image of himself strangling Peter on a rooftop, squeezing his neck until he breaks it.

He rips himself away from Peter and drops his head in his hands as he gasps, desperate for air, fear and guilt and blind, white-hot panic filling him. *His neck.* He can't unsee the bruises, the handprints, the realization of just how close his kid came to dying *because of him.*

"Hey, hey—hey, h-hey, it's okay, it's okay—" Peter reaches out to him, but Bucky flinches at the touch, curling in on himself tighter, mouth open in a silent scream of anguish. *His neck. His goddamn neck. Fuck. FUCK.*

The rush of blood in his ears drowns out Peter's voice, until the boy wraps his arms around him and holds him, tightly, crushing him against his small chest as Bucky shakes from the panic surging through him. He can feel the scratchy material of Peter's splint against his face.

"It's okay, it's okay, we're both okay, we're okay," Peter repeats, crying. Crying again, because of

him. “Dad, Dad, we’re okay.”

“You’re not okay,” Bucky says through gritted teeth, his whole body pulled tight like a bowstring. “You’re hurt.”

Peter tightens his arms around him, and Bucky lets himself be held, though he knows he doesn’t deserve it. Peter could have died, and it would have been all his fault, because he never told Peter just how dangerous he is. That man could have made Bucky kill Peter with his own hands, and Peter would have walked straight into it, not knowing any better.

He can’t ever let that happen.

“Peter,” he says, not remembering the last time his voice sounded so quiet, so lifeless. “I have to tell you the truth.”

Peter goes very still, but he sits there and listens and holds Bucky the entire time, arms occasionally tightening around his neck when Bucky’s voice breaks, accompanied by the sounds of Peter’s sniffles and sob-filled breaths. He doesn’t say anything as they sit together on that mattress, listening to Bucky explain everything about the Winter Soldier—all the horrible things he hadn’t told him in the long months since they became family—and when it’s over, Peter lowers his head until he’s crying into Bucky’s hair and says, “I love you,” and hugs Bucky as tightly as he can.

Bucky brings his own hands up and squeezes Peter’s arms around his neck, reassuringly, then allows a small smile to spread across his face as he says, “Hell, kid, how come you don’t hit nearly as hard as you hug, huh? Pretty sure my neck has dents in it.”

Peter laughs, a quiet, watery sound, and tightens his arms even more, trying to mask the way he’s started to shake as he begins to cry again. Bucky lays there in his son’s arms, Peter’s arms in his hands as he allows himself to be held, and, well—if he closes his eyes and finally lets his own scalding tears run freely down his face, it’s not like Peter is able to see it.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry for the long wait, you guys. My psu in my desktop melted and the tumblr app and tumblr mobile are hot garbage.
>
> Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter.

# A Year

When Bucky peels back the corner of newspaper covering the kitchen window to peek outside, he's pleasantly surprised to see that the snow that had fallen last night is already melted.

Winter had been short, but this is the third time spring has falsely begun, bringing sunshine and warmth and light rain only to be plunged back into snow the moment people started packing their winter gear away.

Peter hadn't seemed to mind, as inexplicably enthused about the snow as he is about pretty much everything else. Bucky hopes he'll never forget the day he came home from work—the sky already black, even though it was only early evening—to find Peter grinning at him from the loveseat, surrounded by paper snowflakes and garlands he'd made himself, hung on the walls and from the ceiling. Peter had been so proud of his decorating, exclaiming, "Surprise!" and then having to explain to Bucky exactly what the decorations represented. They'd stayed up all the way until the end of January.

Bucky doesn't have any memories of Christmases or birthdays or any other kind of family event like that, but he knows the one he'd spent with Peter would be unrivalled in how much it means to him, even if he did.

They'd curled up together on the loveseat, drinking hot chocolate and watching holiday-themed movies, and in the morning they gave each other gifts—sweaters, funnily enough, both knowing how cold the other had been since winter started and wanting them to be warm. Bucky had saved up and gotten Peter an extremely thick and practical hooded sweater that was double-lined with goose feathers to retain as much heat as possible. Peter had gotten Bucky a red and green and appropriately titled "ugly Christmas sweater" that had *Feliz Navi Dad* printed on it.

Bucky had barely taken it off all winter.

In fact, the dad angle seemed to be a running theme among the gifts Peter had given him; a few weeks ago, on his birthday, Peter had gifted him a large coffee mug that said *World's Best Dad* on it—the only piece of kitchenware they have that isn't cracked and chipped to shit, so Bucky still hasn't used it once, wanting to preserve it so it will last, displaying it proudly on the counter so he can see it and smile while he's making breakfast in the mornings, those quiet moments before Peter wakes.

Those moments have been few and far between since they were attacked.

Bucky had been anxious the morning after he told Peter about the Winter Soldier, worried how the kid would react to him afterward, if things would change between them. Worried about the agent they left alive, about having to tell Peter that they definitely had to relocate now, dreading Peter being hurt by the news. Dreading Peter telling him he'd rather they go their separate ways, in light of learning who—*what*—Bucky really is.

But none of that had happened.

Peter had brought him water and Tylenol for the splitting headache he somehow knew Bucky had, and sat next to him where Bucky laid on the mattress, his head pounding to the point that it felt like it was splitting him open. Peter had tended to him, worried, but not afraid. Not of him, at least. It was more than Bucky ever dared to hope for.

“Peter,” he had said after a while, voice splintered from the pain blooming deep in his skull. “We screwed up. We can’t stay here.”

Peter had gone very still. “We didn’t screw up.”

“That guy saw your face,” Bucky argued. “He—Hydra. They know who Spider-Man is now. They know you’re a kid, they’ll find you. We should have—” he barely managed to stop himself in time. “—…left him.”

“We couldn’t just leave him!” Peter had said, eyes wide, as if he was shocked Bucky could say such a thing. “He would have *died.”*

“Peter,” he’d said, tone gentle. “That guy wasn’t a good person.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Peter’s face was equal parts remorseful and stubborn, as if he was pained by the thought of disagreeing with Bucky—of either of them being the cause of someone’s death—but he had held firm, all the same. “We couldn’t just leave him,” he’d said, softly, shaking his head, voice quiet and assured. “It wouldn’t have been the right thing to do.”

Bucky had sighed, part of him wanting to laugh from how incredulous he felt that he could be so completely frustrated and endlessly fond of his kid all at once. He hadn’t particularly *wanted* to kill the man, either—he’d had his fill of death, of murder. But he also knew that Hydra wouldn’t stop, and the cost of leaving that guy alive was uprooting their life here together completely.

“We can’t stay here,” Bucky had said again, his heart breaking at the sight of Peter’s saddened, lowered gaze. “I can’t let them find you again.”

“But—it’s only the one guy who knows my face. He doesn’t even know my name. Maybe we… maybe it will be okay.”

“Not if he tells the rest of Hydra that I’m connected to Spider-Man,” he’d said. “They’ll target you relentlessly, every time you go on patrol. They’re a huge organization, kid, even I don’t have any idea how many connections they have. We aren’t safe here. *You* aren’t.”

Peter had been quiet for a long, tense moment. He ducked his head to hide his face from Bucky’s gaze, and then sighed, his chest rising and falling from the deep breath he took. When he looked up again, his eyes seemed defeated and determined at the same time.

“What if I…” he’d begun, hesitating before he steeled himself. “What if… I didn’t patrol anymore?”

Even now, Bucky’s heart clenches painfully when he thinks of that morning, of the look on Peter’s face and the tone of his voice when he had given up everything for the sake of preserving their life together, the broken home they both love so much.

The morning Peter had chosen Bucky over Spider-Man.

Bucky had tried to argue, but he knew, ultimately, it was Peter’s choice. If Peter would rather stay in Queens, at his school, in their apartment—what right did Bucky have to stop him from hanging up his figurative cape? He had never interfered in Peter’s role as Spider-Man before and he never wanted to; if Peter thought it was worth it, Bucky respected him enough to let him have his choice.

But the months since then have been hard on them both, Peter especially. Bucky hadn’t realized exactly how much being Spider-Man meant to the kid; what he got out of it, besides helping people. What that freedom and responsibility and sense of control offered him, after all the time he

spent feeling completely helpless in his short life. Bucky hadn't realized at the time exactly what it was Peter had sacrificed for them, but slowly, he began to see the toll it took.

Peter had been restless. Every time a siren sounded anywhere nearby, he'd get this tense, tortured look on his face, like it took everything inside his small body to stay put, on the ground. Bucky's heart ached for him in those moments, as often as they were in their crowded city, but there was only so much he could do for Peter.

He tried to distract him, to keep him busy, tire him out as much as possible. They spent even more time together than they had before; Bucky would escort him to and from school now, a little overprotective maybe, but he wouldn't take any chances of Hydra expanding their search to the school districts. They began to do more "normal" activities—Bucky would take Peter out, even when it unnerved him, to the ice-skating rink and the dollar movie and the family bowling alley four blocks over, even when the costs added up. Peter could only sit still at home for so long before he'd be fidgeting with everything and driving Bucky crazy, so they started going out a lot more, until winter really set in.

That had been hard. The change of season meant less daylight, which meant more time spent indoors, as Bucky was hesitant to let Peter out after dark much anymore—Hydra wasn't above making a move in broad daylight, but they were much more likely to attack under the cover of night, out of the public eye.

There had also been moments where Peter seemed… down, almost, once winter started. Not overly, not even that noticeably—but Bucky had still picked up on the longing look Peter got in his eyes now and then, the sluggish way he seemed to move around before he left for school and after he got home. "Some people get depressed around the holidays," Frank had told him when Bucky confided in him. "And he lost his mother, right? Maybe the season is bringing out old grief."

It made sense, but Bucky hated knowing there was nothing he could do for Peter, no way to ease his grief for his aunt and uncle and his parents. All he could do was be there, and when he sat Peter down and told him they could talk about it if he wanted to, well—the way Peter had leaned in to hug him and said, "I'm okay. You're here, so I'm okay," had gutted Bucky completely.

But winter, it seems, is now finally over for good, and with the change of season, Peter also seems to be feeling better these days—more like his usual energetic self, smiling more than he had been in the weeks leading up to Christmas, chatting more animatedly as Bucky walks him to school, Peter smiling and pointing out the different kinds of bird returning from the south.

They have to stop more than usual to pet the random cats bathing in the morning sun, but thankfully, the streets are still relatively empty; Bucky taking Peter to school much earlier than he used to so that he still has time to get to work. They fall into a comfortable silence as Peter's school comes into view, and when they stop a few yards from the building, Peter gives Bucky a quick hug goodbye and then steps back to head inside.

He doesn't make it more than a step before Ned is running over to them, waving excitedly like he's trying to flag down a bus. "Peter! Peter, oh my God!"

Peter stops, sending Bucky a confused, slightly-worried look before he turns back to his friend. "Dude, what?"

"You didn't hear, did you? About the Avengers?"

Bucky stiffens slightly, his shoulders tensing as Ned stops in front of them, gushing, "Dude, everybody's freaking out, it's been all over the news—oh uhm, hi Peter's dad—there was some

kind of, like, attack or something in Lagos. The Scarlett Witch blew up a building full of Wakandan humanitarian workers."

"Holy crap," Peter says, eyes wide and face paling slightly. "That's—that's *awful,* do they know what happened?"

Ned shrugs, seemingly not nearly as disturbed as Peter looks and Bucky feels. "Dunno, I guess she was trying to contain an explosion or something and accidentally aimed it the building."

"How many people are hurt?" Peter asks. His voice is quiet and weighed-down, but Bucky can hear the thread of hope laced in it.

The way Ned shakes his head unravels that thread, however. "They haven't finished counting the, uh… casualties."

Peter noticeably slumps, and Bucky reaches out and lays his hand on the boy's shoulder, not wanting to embarrass the kid by pulling him into his arms in front of his friend and school.

Peter looks up at him, then turns to Ned and says, "Um, I'll—I'll meet you inside, okay?" to which Ned nods, bidding Bucky a quick goodbye as he turns and heads for the doors. Bucky doesn't have a chance to ask Peter if he's okay before the kid wraps his arms around his middle and hugs him, the tension easing out of his narrow shoulders as he does.

Bucky returns the hug, gently patting the back of the boy's head as he says, "You be safe, you hear me? And call me if you need to."

Peter simply nods against his chest, tightening his arms around him.

For the rest of the day while Bucky works, Frank routinely pops his head into the shop to update him on the Lagos bombing, the gruff older man clearly sharing Ned's love of spectacle, a fact that surprises Bucky somewhat.

It's toward the end of the day as Bucky's getting ready to clean up and head out to go get Peter that Frank comes back in, shaking his head exasperatedly, and sternly informs him, "Wakanda's all up in arms over this bombing thing. They're callin' for a UN meeting to talk about putting the Avengers under international government control. It's horseshit if you ask me." Frank gestures animatedly with his hands, his exaggerated ranting usually at least somewhat entertaining to Bucky, but the situation now makes his stomach turn. "That bloody terrorist woulda killed way more people if they let him explode on the street. The hell was that girl supposed to do, huh? It's all nonsense, all this commotion because a kid made a mistake trying to save Captain America's life."

A deafeningly loud *crr-eeek* echoes throughout the shop as Bucky's arm convulses and involuntarily closes his fist, snapping the handle of the metal wrench he's holding in half like a twig. Frank shoots him a startled, disbelieving look as the end of the handle goes flying and hits the concrete floor with a suspicious amount of force.

"Christ, Barnes," Frank says, his tone lacking its usual bite, too stunned. "How the fuck did you do that?"

"Sorry," Bucky mumbles numbly, his mind racing and his arm still resolutely clenched around the rest of the wrench. "Just—grabbed it too tight, it, uh, it was cracked, anyway. Rusted to shit."

“Apparently.” Frank glances at the handle tip, his expression still aghast. “Still, that’s some mean grip you got there. Can’t believe your boy’s so scrawny considering all that muscle you’re packin’.”

Bucky only nods, not really listening as he finally gets his fist open. *I need maintenance again,* he thinks, remembering that it’s almost been a year since that time Peter fixed him up, but then he realizes it’s the tension in his own chest and shoulders that’s making his arm act up, not the hardware. He forces himself to breathe deeply, feels the wires and gears and circuitry calm down slightly in his shoulder plate as the tension releases from his muscles.

“Shit.” Frank comes up next to him, seems to deliberate over laying a hand on his shoulder, then thinks better of it. “Sometimes I forget that you went overseas. Can’t have been easy listenin’ to me yammering on about bombings all day.” Frank’s tone is sympathetic, or as close to as Bucky’s ever heard it, except for the time Peter got sick. “Why don’t you head on home? It’s almost time to pick up your boy, anyway.”

He nods again, his body suddenly feeling heavy, as though his clothes were made of lead. Frank’s concern is misplaced, but he’ll take the invitation to leave for Peter’s school regardless—the sooner he can grab his kid and head home, the better.

They say an abrupt goodbye before Bucky takes off, his chest feeling uncomfortably tight as he makes his way to the school. *That was almost Steve.* His head feels like there’s a hurricane raging inside of it. Steve almost died at the hands of some terrorist in Lagos.

They haven’t seen each other since Bucky pulled him from the river, since DC, almost two years ago, but that apparently isn’t enough time or distance for Bucky to get a handle on the anxiety that washes over him every time he thinks of Steve. Even the part of him that considers the man a threat—or trouble, at the very least—seemed to seize up at the mention of Steve almost getting killed, as though not even becoming enemies would be enough to undo the years of friendship that Bucky has tried very hard not to let himself remember.

The part of him that still does see Steve as his friend had gone cold hearing what Frank had said. If the news is true, and all those people died because one of his teammates was desperately trying to save Steve’s life, well, the part of Bucky that would still gladly die for Steve Rogers knew instantly in that moment the kind of guilt Steve must be feeling right now, that level of grief. If anyone knows the insidiousness of survivor’s guilt, it’s Bucky.

*And Peter.*

He grits his teeth and continues walking, head down, shoulders wide. He keeps moving to keep his blood flowing, sending oxygen throughout his body, an attempt to cool the raging anxiety inside of him. What would he have done, if that had been the news that broke this morning? *Captain America dies in terrorist attack,* or *Lagos bombing claims life of Captain America.* His stomach knots to the point of nausea. He has no intention of ever seeing Steve again. But the thought of not being able to makes him feel light-headed and ill.

The Lagos bombing is all anyone talks about for almost a week straight, until the king of Wakanda calls for a UN meeting in Vienna to sign the newly-drafted Sokovia Accords.

The world is up in arms over the news, the population seemingly divided in half either in favor of or against the idea. It’s not a huge shock, then, that the Avengers seem divided too, with only a few

of them set to attend the meeting in Vienna, as Frank and Ned so graciously informed them. Bucky tries to keep his head down and focus on only the things that matter—his job, and taking care of his child.

Peter is much more concerned with the whole thing than Bucky is, being such an avid fanboy of the Avengers. He spends more time at Ned's house after school in that one week than he had all winter, pouring over internet news sites together, trying to guess what will happen next. Bucky lets him, but always swings by Ned's place to pick him up so they can be home before the sky is fully dark. He can tell that Peter wants to stay longer, but the boy doesn't argue or complain.

In fact he doesn't say much of anything, as they make their way home. Bucky's learned that usually means the boy is thinking or worry about something, but he waits before asking; Peter always comes out and says whatever is on his mind eventually, if something's bothering him. He never keeps it in for long, not from Bucky.

But Peter doesn't say anything, just continues staring down at the ground as they walk further away from their last bus stop. When they're almost home, Bucky thinks *fuck it* and says, "Hey. What's on your mind?"

Peter looks up, glances at him. "Huh?"

"You're burning holes in the concrete. What's up? I can tell something's bothering you."

Peter's eyebrows furrow together, a confused frown. "No—nothing's, uh, bothering me, exactly."

"Then what is it?"

To his surprise, Peter's cheeks actually go a little pink, and he looks back down at the ground. "It's… not a big deal. Don't worry about it."

"Kid," Bucky says. He places his arm around Peter's shoulder encouragingly. "Come on, you know you can talk to me. What's got you all mute and blushy all of a sudden?"

The redness in Peter's cheeks darkens as he ducks his head. "It's *embarrassing*."

"What, you got a girl in trouble or something?"

Peter gives him a flat, unamused look. "Yes. And now I have to marry her."

The grin drops from Bucky's face. "Okay, too far. I am *not* ready for grandkids."

"It's not like you're too young—ow! I'm kidding!"

"You absolutely deserved that," Bucky says, flicking him a second time, more gently. "Are you going to tell me what's actually wrong or not?"

Peter laughs a little, then sighs and says, "It's just, um… well, l-like I said, it's not a big deal. It really isn't, I just—was just thinking—y'know, next week, it'll be a year since we met."

Bucky suddenly regrets teasing Peter the way he had. He hadn't even realized—he wasn't exactly keeping track of the days of the month, last year, before Peter came into his life. He hadn't needed to know more than the day of week, back then.

He clears his throat awkwardly and lets his arm drop from the kid's shoulders. "So what are you thinking? You wanna celebrate?"

“Can we? We don’t have to,” Peter quickly adds, trying to look nonchalant. “I don’t mind if it’s not something big. Even just grabbing a hot dog along the boardwalk would be nice.”

“That does sound nice,” Bucky agrees. “We’ll think of something. We can go out if you want. You need new clothes, anyway.”

Peter makes a face halfway between a pout and a grimace that’s more endearing than it has any right to be. “I say I want to go out and celebrate, and you try and turn it into a practical shopping trip. What gives?”

Bucky laughs. “What’s wrong with being practical? We’re going out anyway, we might as well stop and get you some new jeans.”

“That is such a dad thing to say.”

“Thank you.”

Peter beams, his fake-pout falling from his face as he laughs and leans into Bucky’s side, his warmth achingly familiar beneath his arm.

Bucky’s halfway through his shift at work when it happens.

He’s just got his latest junkyard salvage up and running, the engine purring like it just rolled off the manufacture line, when Frank throws open the door to the shop and fixes him with wide, panicked eyes. Bucky’s instincts are instantly flaring up, the alarm bells inside his body screeching, when Frank waves the TV remote agitatedly in his grasp and says, “There’s been another bombing.”

For a moment, Bucky has no idea what he’s talking about. “Another—in Lagos?”

Frank shakes his head, his face in shock. “No,” he says. He sounds older from the strain. “In Vienna. The UN meeting. One reporter’s claiming the king of Wakanda was killed.”

“What the hell,” Bucky says, straightening up and giving the man his full attention, noticing just how flustered Frank seems to be by the news. “Same people as Lagos? They targeting the Avengers or something?”

Frank shrugs. “No idea yet. Bomb only went off an hour ago.”

“Jesus.”

“The hell is this world coming to,” Frank shakes his head, his tone severe. “It’s one thing to try and take down a trained group like the Avengers. But a UN meeting full of diplomats, in a parliament building full of innocent people? That’s one seriously messed up group or individual.”

Bucky doesn’t know what to say. He’s never seen Frank this shaken up before. “Hopefully they catch whoever did it,” he offers, lamely, not sure what it is the man needs to hear. “How’s Sharon holding up?”

Frank’s face softens somewhat at the question. “She always takes these things so hard, you know. Internalizes them. Been that way ever since we had our daughter—she just couldn’t look at death the same way after that, after having Emily. Every person who gets hurt or killed is somebody’s

kid, that's all she can think about. She hears about a child who's died and she can be down for days after, the thought is just too much to bear."

"Peter's the same way," Bucky says without thinking. "He's kind like that. He can't see a death count as just a number, he grieves for every single person as if he knew them. It takes a toll." He lets his shoulders slump slightly, his body relaxing in a way he isn't sure it ever has around Frank before, more vulnerable than he's ever been around anyone, except Peter. "I don't know how to help him, as his dad, you know? Half of me loves that he cares so much. He's good, he's so damn *good*. I've never met anyone who loves people the way Peter does."

Frank nods, so Bucky figures it's okay to keep going, and says, "But the other half of me, the half that wants to be a good parent—I hate that he takes it so hard. People die, it happens, and he's going to have to deal with it over and over again throughout his life. I don't *want* him to be indifferent to it, but isn't that the better of the two options, in the long run? It'll cause him less pain. He'll get worn down and burnt out if he keeps taking everything personally his whole life. I don't want to change him, but I don't know how to protect him."

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Bucky feels taut with unease. It's one thing, he thinks, to admit to himself that he isn't capable of being the stable, safe caregiver Peter needs—and, more importantly, deserves—but to admit it aloud to someone else, someone who actually *is* a father, it feels like he's given the words a tangible form, agency in the real world, as if speaking them has made them true.

But Frank merely nods again, understanding shining in his dark brown eyes. "That's normal, Barnes. Kids are naive, and it's hard, as their parents, to find the balance between letting them have their naivety and wanting them to be prepared for the real world. You don't want to take away your kid's compassion, and you shouldn't. He's a good boy. But he's young yet, and if you let him, he'll surprise you by how fast he grows up. He'll have to face the real world eventually, and all you can do to prepare him is remind him that, for all the rotten people in this world, there are good people too, who are deserving of that compassion of his."

He can't help the smile that stretches across his face. "Peter's… he's seen rotten people before. He's no stranger to them. He gives them his compassion all the same. I don't know where the hell he got that from, but he's never unkind. I don't think he knows how to be."

"It's easy to say that you'd rather your child be kind than smart," Frank says, knowingly. "But then you actually watch your kid get taken advantage of for their kindness, or hurt by it, and you find yourself wishing they weren't so goddamn good-natured, for their own sake. But that's the selfishness of being a parent, all you care about is your own child's wellbeing, and while you might not be fond of them acting cold, you'd rather they'd do it to others than have it done to them." Frank looks at him then, his gaze deep, as if picking Bucky apart stitch by stitch. "But your boy ain't like that, and neither are you, Jim. You're overprotective as all hell, but don't kid yourself. You have the same compassion that he does."

Distantly, the memory of Peter saying something similar flashes in the background of Bucky's mind—the kid's down-turned face, the soft tone of his voice, the wind gusting over them on a cold rooftop. *You're scared too, of hurting me.* Peter's warm, painfully-trusting smile as he looked up at him, then. *You're the same as I am.*

"Am I that obvious?" Bucky asks aloud before he means to, earning a bark of laughter from his boss.

"You think I don't know you that well after working here almost a whole damn year? You're a complete softy, Barnes."

“Thanks.”

Frank smiles again, and pats him firmly on the back as he turns to leave the shop. “Gonna go see if there’s any updates on the news. You want me to keep you filled in?”

“At this point, I’d be surprised if you didn’t,” Bucky says, and Frank grunts and fails to hide his smile as he leaves.

As Bucky had predicted to Frank, Peter *does* take the attack in Vienna pretty damn hard. He can tell when he picks the kid up from school that Peter is more withdrawn, quieter, his eyes downcast and lightless. Bucky takes him into his arms without saying anything, not worried about the onlookers leaving the school—many of the other parents picking up their children appear to be doing the same thing, the tragedy of what’s happened leaving people in need of comfort, the parents needing to know their kids are safe, the kids needing to know they are, too.

They start walking away from the building so Bucky can say, without worrying too much about being overheard, “You all right?” Not that that’s a particularly unusual question, given the circumstances, but he wants Peter to be able to answer honestly.

The kid just nods, his lips pressed tightly together. “It’s just—so *wrong,*” he says, quietly. “And there’s nothing anyone can do now. That’s the worst part. All the people who just lost someone they loved… there’s nothing anyone can do for them.” Peter’s shoulders hunch slightly, his lower lip quivering. “Ned said that, apparently, one of the council member’s wife also worked in the building. Neither of them made it, they had kids. I keep thinking… what it must have felt like, hearing the news or seeing it online or something, knowing your parents are in there, but not knowing if they’re okay. And then finding out they aren’t. It’s just… it’s all so wrong.”

He tightens his arm around Peter’s shoulders. Someone else was orphaned today. It doesn’t surprise him that that’s what Peter would focus on, agonize over, knowing all too well what that moment must have felt like, even though he claims he can’t imagine it. Bucky knows just how well the boy can relate to that kind of abrupt grief, how familiar he is with that sudden, world-ending loss.

“Whoever’s behind it, I doubt the Avengers will just let this slide. They’re not going to take an attack like this sitting down,” Bucky says, trying to cheer the boy up. ”Maybe they can’t do much for all the grief those people are feeling, but they *will* be able to bring whoever’s responsible to justice. There’s gotta be at least some comfort in that, knowing they won’t be able to hurt anyone else.”

“Yeah,” Peter agrees, numbly.

Bucky sighs and hugs him tighter, one last squeeze before he lets go. “Have you given anymore thought to what you wanna do on Friday?” he asks, changing the subject—something he actually *can* do to hopefully make the kid feel better.

Peter shrugs, but his lips begin to quirk upward in a small smile. “I really am fine with anything. We don’t have to go anywhere, I’m fine with just staying in to celebrate. Thought maybe we could pick up pasta and Gatorade and cookies like the first time we had dinner together, if that’s okay.”

“That sounds great,” Bucky says, then feels himself begin to smirk before he can stop it. “I do have an idea for what we can do after, though.”

Peter glances up at him, quizzically. “What?”

He’s full-on grinning now, unashamed. “Well, in a few short months, you’re gonna be sixteen. So I’m thinking, after dinner, I’ll take you over to the shop and teach you how to drive that new Pontiac I just put together.”

The wide-eyed, disbelieving look Peter gets on his face actually makes Bucky laugh out loud.

“Really?” the kid says, seeming momentarily confused, like he isn’t sure Bucky is actually talking to him or not. “You’re—you want to teach me how to drive?”

Bucky gives a half-shrug, still smiling. “We might end up someplace that it’d be convenient if you knew how. Even if we end up staying here for a long time, eventually you’ll be an adult, and you’ll be able to apply for your license without anybody’s permission. If you already know how by then, it’ll just be that much easier.” He gently ruffles the kid’s hair, his gaze fond. “I can’t take you on any roads, but you can learn how to operate the thing and drive around the scrapyard, at least. I’ve, uh, been putting a track together for you.”

Peter’s eyes light up like Bucky just told him he built him his own spaceship or something. “Oh my God! Yes! Totally, yes, I definitely want to!”

“Okay, okay,” says Bucky, laughing again. “Keep up that enthusiasm, it’s better than being scared shitless.”

“Oh, I’m terrified,” Peter says earnestly, and the deadpan in his voice brings another chuckle out of Bucky. “But it’ll be so much fun! I can’t wait!”

“Yeah, kid.” Bucky smiles. “Me, either.”

Friday is a year. A year since they met, since that fateful night Bucky saved Peter’s life from those muggers and then slammed the door in his face. A year since everything changed for both of them, since the disjointed pieces of who Bucky was—who *Peter* was—found each other and fused together to make something entirely new, two lost, singular entities combining into one family unit.

It feels like both a noteworthy milestone and just another average day all at once. It feels like something they should celebrate, something meaningful that they should honor, and sort of a pointless formality at the same time—after all they’ve been through, everything that’s happened since that night they met, it’s almost a little absurd to make such a big deal out of just one day.

But, Bucky supposes, that’s exactly why they *should* celebrate it, their meeting each other. To celebrate having gone through everything that they did, for surviving the things that they did. For finding each other. It’s significant just how far they’ve come in one year’s time, how completely irreplaceable Peter has become to him. By the time Friday rolls around, Bucky’s more excited by the idea of celebrating it than even Peter is.

That’s why, when he’s elbows deep in an engine at work, only hours away from being able to leave to pick Peter up, and his phone starts ringing with Peter’s name flashing across the screen, well—Bucky’s grinning before he even answers the call. “Hey, kiddo. You excited fo—”

“Dad!”

The unbridled, unmistakable *panic* in the kid's voice gives him pause. "Peter? What's—"

"Dad, Dad, oh my God, shit," Peter says in a rush, his voice breaking as he fights to get the words out. He sounds like he's crying. "We've got a—there's—we're in trouble, we're in huge trouble."

"Hey, hey, calm down," Bucky tries to say, but he's already throwing down his tools and pulling his glove back over his left hand. "Take a deep breath and tell me what happened."

Peter doesn't take a deep breath.

"They think you did it."

Bucky stops, his face twisting in confusion. His brain doesn't have a chance to catch up with him before he's asking, "What?"

"The—in Vienna," Peter says quietly, hushed, his voice breaking. "The attack on the UN. They think *you* did it."

Coldness sweeps over Bucky, chilling him right down to the bone. His own voice sounds far away and alien to him as he asks, "Who?"

"Everyone," Peter says. The weeping in his voice is obvious, now. "Everyone, the whole world. It's all over the news, the internet—they have a—a photo, of *you,* sneaking the bomb in. I mean, it—it's not you, it *can't* be, you were *here,* but—it's your face. All the papers and articles are referring to you by name. They're saying James Barnes, the Winter Soldier, did it."

Bucky's teeth clench so hard that his jaw aches from the strain. "Someone's trying to flush me out," he says, more to himself than to Peter, his tone numb. "They killed those people to frame me so they could force me out of hiding. It has to be Hydra."

Peter's voice is as broken as Bucky suddenly feels. "What do we do?"

Steeling himself, Bucky clenches and unclenches his fist as he forces himself to trample his own panic down, needing to keep both of them moving. They're well and truly out of options, now.

"Where are you? Still at school?"

"I'm—I just left, I'm on my way home. I couldn't—I saw the news, and I couldn't—"

"No, that's good," Bucky says. "You get home, grab the bugout bags, and wait for me. If I'm not there in fifteen minutes after you arrive, we go with strategy B, all right? You remember what strategy B is?"

Peter sniffles, then says, "Uh huh."

"Good. If I don't make it there in time, you carry on with strategy B. I'll meet up with you at the rendezvous as soon as I can."

"Promise?" Peter whispers, crying again.

"Yeah, kiddo, I promise," Bucky says, no idea how his voice can be so much calmer than he feels. "You know what to do. You'll be all right. I'll see you at home, okay? And if I don't, I'll find you. I promise."

"Okay," says Peter. "I'll—I-I'll see you at home. Be safe. Please be safe."

“You too, kid. Be safe. I’ll see you soon.”

He’s out the door before he’s even hung up the phone, rushing through the dealership urgently when he catches sight of Frank, alone at the front desk, staring fixatedly at the wall-mounted TV.

Bucky’s stomach drops.

It’s exactly as Peter said—the news station is broadcasting a photo of him—of his face—entering the building in Vienna, his name and identity in big, bold letters underneath it for all the world to see. Frank slowly turns around and looks at him, his eyes blown black and wide with shock, his face utterly confused. “Jim?”

Bucky’s surprised by just how badly he wants to explain everything to the man.

But there’s no time for that.

He turns and runs from the room, ignoring the shouts that trail after him, Frank calling his name over and over, but Bucky’s too fast. He has to make it home. He has to make it home before he’s found, before Peter is found—they have to get away, far, far away from everything, where no one who would separate them can find them.

It’s the determination of that thought that keeps Bucky moving all the way back home. He doesn’t stop, not even for a breather; he barely manages to avoid the traffic and other pedestrians as he beelines straight for their apartment. The only thought rushing through his head now is Peter, getting home to him and taking the kid somewhere safe, away from all this mess, until he can figure out what to do. It doesn’t matter where they go. They just need to get *away.*

Bucky makes it back to the apartment in record time, making it up the steps in quick, boundless leaps, not caring at all for being stealthy now—that can wait, everything can wait until he and Peter are reunited.

He pushes open the door, the wood splintering as he forces it. The first thing he sees is Peter in the kitchen, facing him with wide, terrified eyes, his bugout bag tightly secured to his back and Bucky’s bag clutched desperately in his hands. Peter’s back is against the counters, as far away from the front door and Bucky as he can be in this tiny, shithole apartment.

The second thing he sees is Steve.

Steve turns around and meets his gaze. Neither of them says anything, the room utterly silent, until all Bucky can hear is the distant sound of sirens, steadily growing louder.

# Pursued

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The look of surprise on Steve's face momentarily stuns Bucky. It's almost as though Steve didn't expect him to come through the door, like they just happened to run into each other on the street, by happenstance. There's a flicker of confusion in his expression before he draws his gaze to Peter, the silence between the three of them thick and stifling in the air.

Peter huddles a little further against the counter, frightened and unnerved by the intensity of Steve's stare, but he doesn't see what Bucky sees; doesn't see the worry and disbelief, the almost full-bodied denial Steve is portraying. He keeps his eyes on Peter a moment longer, trying to fit the pieces together in his head, before he turns back to Bucky, and his expression completely changes.

It amazes him how well he still knows Steve Rogers.

Really, he should probably be proud of that, of what it says about his intelligence or his cognitive ability or whatever the hell it is that has let his brain persevere after the kind of abuse it's been through. It's remarkable that after everything, after being tortured a million times, after being separated for almost a century, Bucky can still tell by the look on Steve's face that he's not here to help.

It's the way his jaw is clenched, really. There's grief in his eyes, outlined by the material of his mask which leaves the lower half of his face completely open—that downturned mouth, the tightness of his frown, teeth gritted to keep himself from saying what he really wants to, the wrong thing.

Bucky can guess what it is he wants to say, what Steve would have said if it was just the two of them, but it isn't. This isn't Steve and Bucky reuniting. This is Captain America finally tracking Bucky down.

Steve squares his shoulders, standing taller, all but proving Bucky's point. Someone obviously tipped him off—who knows, could have been the lady downstairs or their landlord or even Mr. Delmar, for all the difference it would make—but whoever led Steve here, it's clear that he's not the only one. The distant sirens and babble of a voice from Steve's ear-comm are proof enough of that.

They don't have time to wait, and they definitely don't have time for a fight before this whole building is swarming with law enforcement. Bucky keeps his gaze locked with Steve's as he forces his shoulders to relax slightly, the metal plate in his left making that especially difficult with its considerable weight.

He's never known Steve—Captain America or otherwise—to wait for the other person to speak first, not even before the war. But at this very moment, Steve seems more than content to wait and see what Bucky has to say.

So Bucky holds his gaze and says, "I wasn't in Vienna." He tries, but he can't quite keep the guilt out of his voice. "I don't do that anymore."

To his surprise, Steve actually seems to believe him, the tenseness of his shoulders relaxing slightly. His eyes betray the straight face he's desperately trying to keep up. He opens his mouth,

but what Bucky expects him to say couldn't be farther from what he does.

"Why is there a kid here?"

Peter tenses against the kitchen counter, clutching Bucky's backpack tighter in his arms. Bucky's own face must change, too, because Steve hardens his stance and glances him over, like he's sizing him up. "Buck," he says again, voice even despite the imploring look in his eyes. "Why are you living with a kid?"

He doesn't expect Steve to understand, but he tells him the truth, anyway.

"Because he's mine." He nods his head in Peter's direction, doesn't look away from Steve as he raises his face. "He's my kid."

If this wasn't a crisis, the look on Steve's face might have actually been funny. His lips part like he's trying to speak but has no idea what to say, eyes narrowing as he wracks his brain, trying to make sense of what the hell Bucky just said to him.

It's as good a distraction as any.

"Peter," Bucky says. "Come on, time to go."

Peter immediately moves to go around Steve, but he flinches to a stop when Steve lifts his arm in front of him, blocking him. "Wait, Buck, I don't—I—" He sighs in frustration, clearly still rattled by the bomb Bucky dropped on him. "I can't let you leave."

"They think I bombed the UN," Bucky says slowly, letting the weight of the situation sink into his words. "Safe bet they're planning to shoot first and ask questions later. We've gotta move."

A tortured look crosses Steve's face. "I can't let you," he says again, lowering his arm as he steps toward Bucky. "I need you to come with me. Don't make this end in a fight, Buck—"

"No!"

Both of them startle when Peter dashes between them, his back to Bucky, arms thrown out protectively as he stares up at Steve. Bucky can't see the look on his face, but the tense, frightful, unmistakably determined tone of his voice rings clear as day. "You're not taking him!"

Steve stares down at him in surprise, brows drawn together in confusion. Bucky can practically see the wheel turning in his head, and he sighs and reaches out for Peter's hood, pulls him back, away from Steve, trying to herd him off to the side. But Peter plants his feet on the floor with his damn superpowers until he's immovable, so Bucky lays a hand on his shoulder and says, "Kid, stop it, you're not fighting anybody. Get behind me."

"He said it could end in a fight!" Peter protests, still glaring up at Steve, so goddamn stubborn when he wants to be. "And I'm not gonna let him hurt you!"

A crack forms in Steve's expression, a hint of something akin to pain breaking through the incredulity and confusion on his face. The two of them could probably take Steve down, or at least immobilize him, but they can't afford to waste that kind of time, and the less Steve and whatever organization he's working for knows about Peter, the better.

"We don't have that kind of time," he tells him, hating how tight the muscle of Peter's shoulder is beneath his hand, how clearly stressed and frightened his son is. He tries to make his voice soothing. "Peter, kiddo, we have to go. Come on, we have a plan, remember?"

Peter starts to relax, his shoulder loosening slightly under his palm, but then Steve steps forward again with a stern, “You’re both going to have to come with m—” and Peter lifts his hand, as fast as lightning, and shoots two blasts of webbing from his wrist that glue Steve’s feet to the floor.

Steve and Bucky share a surprised look, before Bucky is clapping Peter on the back and bending down to grab his discarded backpack. “Let’s go,” he says to the boy as he pulls his arms through the straps, leading him to the door.

“Buck,” Steve calls after him, trying to pull his legs free of the webbing. Bucky turns back as he holds the door open for Peter, lets a moment pass between him and Steve in place of a goodbye, knowing the other man can clearly see the resolution on his face. He doesn’t say anything as he follows Peter out of the apartment, letting the door fall closed behind him.

The sirens are louder the moment they step outside, blaring as they converge on them from all directions. The first of them are no doubt just around the corner, so Bucky takes Peter’s shoulder in his hand again and kneels down to gaze up at his son severely. “Peter, we’re going to have to split up, okay?”

Panic washes over Peter’s face. “What?” he says, watery and afraid. “But—why? Why can’t we just go?”

“Steve didn’t know you were here,” Bucky says urgently, desperate to make him understand. “He didn’t know about you. They’re only after *me,* Peter. And I can outrun them. Go ahead without me, and we’ll meet at the rendezvous, just like we planned.” Peter shakes his head, desperately, his eyes welling up. Bucky takes his face in hands and begs, “I *can’t* let them find you, you *know* that. I promise, Peter, I’m going to meet up with you. I just need you to go on ahead of me. *Please.*”

The sirens wail, not even a street away, and those webs won’t hold Steve for long. “Go,” Bucky says as he stands back up, ushering Peter to the edge of the balcony, his own panic bleeding into his voice. “Go, now!”

Peter whimpers, but ducks his head, pulling his hood up as he webs off the side of the balcony, onto the adjacent roof, before running and making a break for the direction of their rendezvous.

Bucky sighs his relief, the stress lessened now that his kid is—momentarily—out of harm’s way. He makes for the roof in the opposite direction, planning to lose whoever’s tailing him before looping back to their meeting place.

It’s a long jump from the edge of his balcony to the windowsill on the building across from him, but Bucky swiftly and agilely maneuvers over the outside of the building until he’s booking it across the flat rooftop. The sirens fade out below him the farther away he gets, his backpack a heavy weight on his back. As the edge of the building gets closer, Bucky takes a deep breath and builds momentum for the leap, feet steady as he pushes off the ledge, adrenaline surging as he’s airborne before meeting the lip of the next building, landing ungracefully with a sideways roll before he’s back on his feet, running again.

And then he sees the shadow overhead.

He barely has a chance to throw himself out of the way before the body lands on him, a man in a suit, pitch black and feline with narrowed white eyes. Bucky staggers back to his feet, eyes wide and panting, as the stranger brandishes metal claws from the tips of his fingers, and then lunges at him, aimed for his throat.

Bucky counters as best he can, blocking punches and kicks as they come, though his own blows

don’t seem to be landing with as much force as they should—maybe it’s the suit, or as the outfit would suggest, this isn’t a typical fighter he’s dealing with. Great.

His opponent leaps forward and Bucky loses his footing trying to dodge out of the way, landing on his backpack painfully as he’s pinned by the other man. He narrowly avoids a handful of metal claws to his face and he grapples for the upper hand, his vision obscured by a raised hand, claws posed for the kill, swiping down for his neck. He crosses his arms in front of his face to absorb the damage, bracing himself.

Suddenly the stranger is hit by something, knocked sideways, his body leaving Bucky’s entirely. Bucky pushes himself up, panting, eyes searching the man’s body for any sign of white webbing.

*Peter—?*

But there is none, and when Bucky turns his head he sees Steve, hand raised to catch his shield ricocheting back to him, running to the edge of the building where he leaps to land where they are. Bucky jumps to his feet and beelines for the nearest ledge. It doesn’t matter now what direction he goes in; he can find his way to Peter after he loses *them,* no matter where he ends up.

The black-suited stranger is quick to pursue him, hot on his heels, Steve not far behind him. Bucky grits his teeth in frustration and vaults over the side of the building, jumping from narrow ledge to narrow ledge as he makes his way down, until he lands hard on the street below. There’s traffic and pedestrians all around them, and sirens still blaring not far away, the whir of helicopter blades somewhere above. Bucky takes his chances that the streets will slow Steve and whoever the hell this other guy is down as he bolts for the underpass, cars honking and swerving as he runs through the highway, his heart pounding in his chest.

He jumps down to the road beneath the overpass, scarcely avoiding on oncoming van which he turns and runs after, overtaking it, keeping his pace beside the vehicles he’s running alongside to avoid someone hitting him by changing lanes.

There’s an uproar of honking and tires screeching behind him, and Bucky can only assume it’s his pursuers, but he doesn’t dare waste time by turning to look. He forces his legs to keep moving, needing to create as much distance between them as possible so he can slip away.

The opportunity arises in the form of a black bike speeding toward him, the rider unsuspecting as Bucky skids to a halt and grabs the handle as the bike speeds past, throwing the driver to the ground as he flips it in midair, landing on it and twisting the handles before the tires have even touched the ground. The bike jerks as it speeds the opposite way it came, Bucky expertly weaving it through traffic as he veers back to the right side of the highway, falling in line with the cars moving away from the overpass.

He can still hear the sirens converging on him. Any moment, police cars will be overtaking him and the helicopter will be overhead. His only chance is to find cover and slip away, but he knows these streets, has spent the last two years wandering them, knowing this day would come. He makes a sharp right turn, the bike teetering dangerously as it whips around, but he keeps it upright and squeezes through a narrow alley not meant for traffic.

It won’t slow Steve or that other guy down, but Bucky’s more concerned about escaping that helicopter at the moment. He cuts across the road the alley opens on to, and then dips down another, repeating the process until the sounds of police sirens and helicopter blades are faint in the distance. He’s sure he’s still being pursued on foot, but that will take a little more finagling to get rid of.

As long as he's out of sight, he can slip inside or underground and disappear. He pulls the bike onto a residential street, careful not to draw attention to himself. If that helicopter catches sight of him, it's over; he'll never be able to outrun its line of sight. He turns onto a long, straight stretch of road beside the boardwalk and kicks the bike into gear, speeding up faster than even Steve could run. He hasn't turned around to check if he's out of sight yet, but when the chance comes to steer the bike onto a turn-off leading out of Queens, north to Manhattan, Bucky takes it. If luck is on his side, they won't have shut down the highway yet.

Turns out that, for once, Bucky *is* in luck and the insurmountable midday Manhattan traffic isn't against him. He's able to weave the bike through backed-up vehicles until there's enough of a lull to turn around and confirm no one is directly behind him, and then he slips into the shadows, abandons the bike, and makes his way north, to their rendezvous.

The shipment yard is as sparsely-populated as the last three times Bucky scoped it out. It's little more than a warehouse backed onto a small runway meant for two-man cargo planes, conveniently placed just outside city limits. It's a small operation, complete with a whopping total of two planes and one large hangar that's at least a solid ten minute walk from the main office. Bucky waits by the treeline until he's certain there's no one around the hangar, and then he makes his way toward the warehouse, keeping an eye out for any sign of his pursuers or, more importantly, for Peter.

He makes it as far as the parking lot outside the hangar before he has to dive out of the way or be pinned down by the man in the black suit. Bucky's instantly back on his feet, blocking the blows and swipes as they come, until a deep and urgent voice shouts, "Bucky, duck!" and his body obeys before he's even thought the command through, watching in amazement as Steve's shield hits his attacker square in the chest and knocks him against the wall of the building.

Bucky stands back up and turns to see Steve, running up to him, accompanied by a somewhat-familiar man in a winged red and grey flightsuit. Steve positions himself between Bucky and the man in the black suit, arms out to break up the fight, while the man in the winged suit stands further back with his arms raised, holding a gun in each hand, aimed at Bucky and the other guy respectively.

"Get down on the ground," the guy in the wingsuit demands, glaring at Bucky beneath a pair of red goggles. "I don't think you wanna know just how happy I'd be to shoot you."

Steve starts to send the man a reproachful look, but his gaze snaps back to the guy in the black suit as he stands up straight and takes a step toward them.

"Move, Captain," he says lowly, his voice cold. Bucky places the accent immediately. *Wakandan.* "I won't ask a second time."

"It wasn't him, your Highness," says Steve, diplomatically, still standing between them. Bucky tries to stay focused on the threat of being shot by the guy behind him, clawed to death by the guy in front of him, or arrested by Steve next to him, but all he can focus on is glancing over his surroundings for any trace of his son. He should be here by now, but Bucky deeply prays that he isn't, knowing Peter would not hesitate to throw himself into this mess.

"I said on the ground, Barnes!" the other man shouts, his hand tightening around the gun's grip. His finger drags over the trigger and Bucky's worst fear comes to life—before the sound of the shot can even ring through the air, Peter lands on the ground between them, webbing the gun out of the guy's hands and flinging it across the runway toward the treeline.

Bucky feels sick to his stomach, but Peter stands up straight, clad head to toe in his Spider-Man uniform. He hopes the boy changed into that when he got here, and wasn't webslinging across New York as Spider-Man, where Hydra could be looking for him, but now isn't the right time to ask.

"What the hell?" the guy in the red goggles exclaims, looking at his empty hand and then back to Peter. "Who the hell are you?"

Peter doesn't say anything, just lifts his hands and webs up the guy's other gun before he can even aim it at them. Bucky's attention is drawn away as the guy in the black suit lunges, intercepted by Steve countering with his shield.

The two begin to brawl, and Bucky hastily turns and is relieved to see that Peter has webbed up the other man's feet, gluing him to the pavement. The guy has a knife pulled from his thigh holster and is frantically trying to cut through the webs with it, cursing colorfully the whole time.

He doesn't waste a second of this opportunity. Bucky rushes forward and grabs Peter's shoulder, pulling him in the direction of the hangar. The kid takes the hint and starts running behind him, making a break for the building while their pursuers are distracted.

Steve and the Wakandan man break apart when they start running, the Wakandan abandoning his fight with Steve to chase Bucky, Steve abandoning the fight to chase him. They're only a few feet from the bay doors when a loud noise fills the air, like a rocket, only quieter. Peter comes to a stop beside him, and Bucky turns to question why, only to see his kid staring upward through his black goggles. Bucky follows Peter's line of sight, disbelief washing over him. *God fucking damn it.*

Steve comes up behind them protectively as Iron Man lands on the roof of the hangar. He's joined by another man in a very similar suit—Bucky knows he's an Avenger from all of Peter's tales, but can't quite remember the name. Iron Warrior? Something like that.

Bucky can only imagine what Peter's face must look like right now, having come face-to-face with his childhood hero in the worst fucking possible circumstances. He's as rigid as stone beside him, looking as paralyzed as he did when he had a gun to his face, the first night they met.

And then Iron Man's helmet opens, his face revealed, and he glances at Bucky and Peter, his eyes lingering on Peter for a long moment, before he sneers at Steve. "Adding kidnapping to the list of charges, Cap?"

"It wasn't him, Tony," Steve implores, turning to face the man in the black suit behind them, still holding his arms out defensively. "Just give me a chance to explain."

Tony lowers himself off of the hangar, stopping on the ground ahead of them as the repulsors in his hands and boots power down. His friend joins him, effectively blocking their way, and Bucky resists the temptation to pull Peter closer to him, feeling the boy's fear in the air and instinctually needing to comfort him.

"Sounds like you have a *lot* of explaining to do," Tony says, and once again glances at Peter. The kid nervously shifts under his gaze, his tense muscles flinching slightly as he steps a little closer to Bucky. Bucky fixes Iron Man with a deep, heated glare, full of warning to stay the hell back.

"Barnes is not for you," the man from Wakanda says, but whether he's talking to Steve or Iron Man, Bucky isn't sure. "I am the one who is bringing him to justice."

"Stand down, Cap," Tony says agreeably, and lifts his hand, aiming his gauntlet at Steve's chest.

“You’re outnumbered.”

Steve seems to think it over for a moment, before he clearly makes his decision, his eyes not leaving the man in the black suit for a single second. “I guess so,” he says lightly, before he’s whipping his shield hard in Tony’s direction, while diving the other way to block the Wakandan’s incoming attack. Stark is knocked back as the shield unexpectedly slams into his chest, and then his friend rushes forward.

Bucky moves in front of Peter and goes to defend himself, but Steve shouts, “Sam, a little help!” and the man in the red goggles—Sam, apparently—intercepts the not-Iron-Man suit with a regretful sounding, “Sorry about this, Colonel.”

Using the moment of chaos to their advantage, Bucky gestures for Peter to follow him and begins running for the hangar, his son close behind him, before Iron Man cuts them off, blocking their path again. His helmet is once again in place, and his voice is deep and robotic-sounding as he says, “Not so fast,” aiming his palm at Bucky’s head.

They have no choice but to fight. Bucky half turns to Peter and says, quiet and stern, “I’ll hold him off. You run for the hangar. Wait for me there.”

“No!” Peter protests, just as quiet but much more desperate. “I’m not leaving you out here alone!”

It’s then that Iron Man’s gauntlet lights up, glowing white and threatening as he holds his aim in Bucky’s direction. “Step away from the kid,” he says, tone hard and angry. “Get on your knees, hands behind your head.”

“Go, Peter,” is all Bucky says, before he’s lunging forward, ducking below the blast that shoots out of Stark’s glove before he’s driving his metal fist into the suit’s chest plate. Stark raises his arms to block, so Bucky plants a foot in the man’s midsection and firmly kicks him back. Peter still hasn’t moved, so Bucky turns back and quickly shouts, “*Go!”*

That seems to snap Peter out of his daze, and he runs forward toward the hangar, Iron Man not stopping him but taking advantage of Bucky’s momentary distraction, delivering a heavy blow that sends him sprawling on his back. Bucky groans and tries to roll over, to get back on his feet, but Stark aims another repulsor blast at him threateningly, keeping him pinned down.

For a moment Bucky is terrified that Peter will come back and throw himself in front of the blast, but it’s actually Steve who takes Iron Man down, ungracefully knocking into him just in time to stay the man’s attack. The two exchange punches as they try to subdue the other, and Bucky jumps to his feet and sprints for the hangar, spotting Peter inside, desperately trying to open the door of a cargo plane.

He almost makes it to him before he’s tackled from behind. It’s only instinct that has Bucky covering the back of his neck with his metal arm, the horrid sound of metal scraping metal filling the large, open building as the claw-like nails of the Wakandan’s suit scratches his arm. Bucky is able to roll over and block another attempt for his neck, desperately urging, “I wasn’t in Vienna—I didn’t kill your king!”

The man raises his hand, claws out, intending to swipe down and kill him.

“Then why did you run?”

Bucky barely manages to block the attack, countering with his own to try and get the man off of him. The man is frighteningly fast, and his attacks have more than enough deadly force behind

them—Bucky doubts he would be able to beat this guy under the best of circumstances, and these are not the best of circumstances.

A brutal punch to the ribs has Bucky's vision whiting out for a split second, and he groans from the pain, realizing a second too late that he's left his throat open and vulnerable to his attacker. He sees the light glinting off the man's metal claws as he raises them, and Bucky is sure that this is it, the end. The claws descend, too fast to counter, straight for his throat, before his vision is obscured by red.

"*No!"*

The weight of the man lifts off of him, and Bucky forces himself to sit up despite the throbbing pain in his ribs. The pain is washed away by the dread—the consuming, mind-numbing dread—of realizing that Peter has knocked the man back, that he grabbed his hand just in time.

Bucky stares ahead in shock, Peter kneeling in front of him, his mask gone, gripping the man's wrist to hold his hand still. Peter's back is to him, the man towering over him, so Bucky can't see his face, but he can picture the expression he must have based on the desperate, pleading sound of his voice.

"Please," Peter says, the man's claws still out and only inches from his face, his hand still gripping the man's wrist tightly. The man seems frozen, standing above them with his hand easily caught in Peter's much smaller one, obviously struck by the look on Peter's face, if the way he's staring down at him is anything to go by.

"Please," Peter says again, begging, merely holding the man's wrist rather than restraining it. "Please don't hurt my dad."

The white eyes of the man's suit widen, and he drops his hand and takes a step back, as though in shock. Bucky rushes to his feet and pulls Peter up at the same time, turning him around, checking him over, his hands cupping his cheeks when he finds no injuries. "Peter, Peter, are you okay?"

Peter nods, his own fear clear as day in his dark eyes, and he wraps his fingers around Bucky's metal wrist to hold on to before he turns back to the other man.

"We—we have alibis," Peter says, not letting Bucky herd him behind him when he tries. "We weren't at the UN, you can check, please—we were *here.* My dad was at work, you can ask his boss."

The man looks at Bucky, then. He has no idea what kind of expression he has on his face beneath his mask, but his white eyes narrow as he seems to study him. Bucky figures it's their best shot and says, placing his hands on Peter's shoulders protectively, the boy's hand still tightly wrapped around his wrist, "It's true. It wasn't me." He looks at the man's eyes, keeps their gazes locked as he says, "I was running because I had to find my kid."

If the man was about to say anything, it's interrupted by the sudden *crash* of a body being thrown through the metal sheets of the hangar's walls. The man in the winged suit—Sam?—hits the pavement hard and rolls a few feet with a groan, coming to a stop and hardly moving as the not-Iron-Man suit steps through the hole he made in the wall.

The man raises his gauntlet at Bucky and coldly says, "Considering it hasn't worked when everybody else said it, I'm not going to bother telling you to get down on your knees." He briefly glances at the man in the black suit, and offers up a congenial, "You might want to get out of the way of this, Prince T'Challa," before his palm fills with light.

Bucky grabs Peter's shoulder and tries to shove him out of the way, but Peter stiffens and stays glued in place, throwing his arms out to shield Bucky from the blast the man has aimed at them. "Please, Mr. War Machine, please just listen—"

"Move, kid, or you're gonna get hurt," War Machine says, not backing down. "Step away from the Winter Soldier, or I'll shoot."

Bucky goes to lunge for the man, fear and rage driving him to imbed his fist in the man's armor, but a frantic scream of, "Rhodey, *no!"* gives Bucky pause and has the War Machine's hand lowering slightly.

Iron Man flies through the bay doors, coming to a jerky stop next to his friend, and he grabs War Machine's weaponized gauntlet and aims it away, his helmet retreating. "Rhodey, no, don't shoot —not the kid!"

Steve runs in just as a groan fills the hangar. Sam wobbles to his feet, and Steve stops, bruised and bloodied, his gaze landing on Bucky and then spotting Sam leaning against the plane.

"Sam, you all right?"

The man grunts and gives him a small wave, indicating that he'll live, and Steve rushes forward and inserts himself between Bucky and T'Challa, protectively. T'Challa still hasn't said a single word, gazing past Steve at Bucky and Peter, and soon, all eyes are on them.

Peter lowers his arms and steps a little closer to Bucky, nervously, and Bucky takes him by the shoulder and pulls him against his side. War Machine's helmet retracts to show his confused face, and he stares at Stark before looking to Steve, and then to Bucky and Peter.

"Okay," he says, like he's trying to gather his thoughts. "What the hell is going on here?"

"I'd like to know that too," Tony says, satisfied once Rhodey's lowered his gauntlet. He turns his suspicious gaze onto Steve and Bucky. "Cap? You care to explain this?"

Steve glances at T'Challa, but when the man doesn't move or speak, he looks back to Tony and says, "Buck says he was here, not in Vienna. I believe him. He deserves to have his alibis checked, at least. He deserves a trial." He looks at T'Challa again, as though expecting the man to object. "I know you don't care, but I believe it wasn't him. Innocent until proven guilty."

"You're not exactly an unbiased party, Steve," Rhodey says.

"That wasn't even what I meant," Tony says, his eyes narrowed with anger. He looks down at Peter, and Bucky tenses when the kid's hands nervously fist into the fabric of his shirt. "I meant, why the hell is the Winter Soldier here*,* in New York, with *Spider-Man?"*

Bucky flinches almost as hard as Peter does. He knows. Stark knows—he knows Peter's identity, knows about Spider-Man's existence. And a man like him, with no shortage of money and resources at his fingertips—God only knows what *else* he knows.

Everyone looks at Peter then, except Bucky and Tony, caught in a glaring match with each other. There's accusation and distrust plainly painted on Stark's face, and Bucky's sure he looks as threatened as he feels, his hackles raised, knowing they're trapped and surrounded and well and truly fucked.

Then T'Challa straightens his back and says, "I want to look into this man's alibis."

All eyes in the room shift to him, and a look of surprised relief crosses Steve's face as he nods, gratefully. "Thank you, your Highness. I—"

"I have some conditions," T'Challa interrupts, his tone severe and leaving no room for argument. "I want his location secured while we are investigating."

Bucky pulls Peter a little closer to his side, looking at Steve when the man says, "We can take him somewhere secure. If someone's framing him, chances are they're waiting for us to make a public spectacle of his arrest. We should go somewhere low-key."

"The kid can stay with me," Tony says, and Bucky's head snaps in his direction, his face twisting in anger.

"That's *not* happening," he says venomously, his glare heated and furious. "My kid stays with *me.*"

"This isn't up for debate," Rhodey says, lifting an eyebrow at him patronizingly. "You do realize you're under arrest here, right?"

His reply dies in his throat when Stark sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose tiredly. "Look. Can we just—calm down here, for a second?"

Steve's shoulders seem to relax at his friend's request, and Bucky eyes him warily when he turns around and asks, "Buck, if we agree to keep you two together, will you come with us?"

Peter leans more heavily against his side, so Bucky simply gazes back at Steve and replies, "Apparently I don't really have a choice."

"Your Highness," Tony addresses T'Challa. "If we agree to work together to get to the bottom of what's really going on here, would you be willing to let us take Barnes into our custody while we figure it out?" Bucky doesn't miss the way Stark's eyes briefly land on Peter, before returning to the other man. "I have a couple locations in mind that can be fully secured. You're more than welcome to check them out yourself first."

A moment passes where T'Challa doesn't say anything, staring at Bucky through the unreadable white eyes of his mask. Then he nods, looking to Steve, and then to Tony. "I will allow him to stay with you while we investigate. But know this, Captain Rogers—if he is found guilty, and if you allow him to escape justice, you will bear the wrath of Wakanda."

Steve's voice is quiet but all too confident. "You have my word, your Highness."

T'Challa nods. "Stark," he says, turning to Tony. "You will inform me of where this man is being kept. Once I have discovered who is behind the bombing in Vienna, I will return to either collect him, or free him."

Peter wraps his arms around Bucky's middle, like he's terrified the man is about to be snatched away from him. Realizing that he probably *is,* Bucky cards his metal fingers through the boy's hair, hoping to bring him comfort. T'Challa glances at them, then meets Bucky's eyes.

"I will uncover the truth," he says. It could be a threat, but Bucky swears he heard a hint of reassurance in the man's voice.

"I'll help you investigate," Stark offers, his helmet rebuilding itself over his face, turning his voice robotic again. "Two heads are better than one, and all that."

"I will too," Steve says. "Anything you need, just let me know."

“I do not believe that will be necessary,” says T’Challa. He looks at Stark, his tone doubtful, but not unkind. “But I will inform you if it is.”

“Great, sounds like a plan,” Tony says, his mask once more retreating. “Plane’s on its way as we speak.”

“So, wait a minute—” Rhodey interjects, incredulously staring at Tony. “We’re just going to say we lost him? You want us to *lie* about having custody of the Winter Soldier, hide a dangerous terrorist while we snoop around behind Ross’s back, in the *middle* of arguing about the Accords? Really, Tony?”

Stark pretends to think it over, his expression so obviously fake that it’s obnoxious. “Yeah, I think that’s exactly what we’re going to do.” Rhodey’s disbelief doesn’t lessen, so Stark genuinely looks at him and says, almost too quiet for Bucky to hear, “Rhodey, this is Steve we’re talking about here. Come on, now’s the time to team up.”

Steve’s face softens, and he turns to Bucky, glancing down at the way Peter is still nervously clinging to him as he does. “What do you say, Buck?” He gives Peter a small smile, but the worry is practically etched into his face. “Will you come with us until we’ve got all this figured out?”

Peter’s arms tighten around his waist. Bucky knows there’s no way they can outrun them now, so he nods, squeezing Peter’s shoulder reassuringly as he does. “My kid stays with me,” he says again, making his only demand very clear. Steve nods to him, but then Bucky glances behind him, at Stark, whose face does nothing to reassure him whatsoever.

It’s then that the roar of a plane overhead can be heard, and the group watches through the bay doors as the vehicle touches down on the runway, rolling to the other end, opposite their hangar.

“Well, that’d be your ride,” Tony says. “Rhodey and I will fly ahead and get the place in lockdown mode. Sam should probably fly with you, he’s not looking so hot.”

Bucky watches Steve turn and look at Sam, still resting against the cargo plane painfully.

Stark turns to T’Challa. “You need a lift, too? You’re more than welcome to hitch a ride with them.”

“No need,” T’Challa says, and thumbs over the wristband of his suit. The rustling of trees is heard outside, and then a smaller, sleeker, two-seater aircraft noiselessly touches down outside the hangar from the forest nearby. Stark stares at the thing with wide, impressed eyes. “Huh. Okay then.”

T’Challa turns to his plane, but then stops. He looks back at Tony, then at Steve, and at last to Bucky, his gaze drifting down to Peter and lingering there for a moment. “I will be in touch,” he promises, before walking to his aircraft and boarding it.

Tony turns back to Steve once he’s gone. “I’ll leave transportation to you,” he says, then nods his head to the plane at the end of the runway. “It’s a pilotless model, so you don’t need to worry about a cover story or anything like that. I’ve already set the coordinates. It’ll take off once you’re onboard.”

“And it will take us where, exactly?” Bucky asks, the suspicion heavy in his voice. Stark glances at him, his own tone short and clipped. “Montana. We have a lovely family cottage there for vacationing in the summer. Like I said, we’ll fly ahead and secure it. But it’s remote. Best place I can think of to lie low for now.” Stark looks down at Peter again, his expression softening somewhat. “You’ll like it. It’s quaint, but the property is nice.”

Bucky glances down at Peter too, but the boy isn't looking at him, or at Stark. His gaze is fixed on the bay doors and the runway beyond, his hands still tightly fisted in Bucky's shirt.

Rhodey walks away from them to help Sam stand up straight, offering him a muted apology as he half-carries him toward the plane. Tony helps, taking Sam's other side and limping him down the runway, Steve and Bucky and Peter behind them.

They could run now. This is most likely their last chance, Bucky realizes. They could subdue Steve and bolt back to the cargo plane, hijack it and get as far away as they can, or they can go with Steve—with the Avengers—and place their fates completely in someone else's hands. Bucky knows that running now would cement his guilt. But he knows he isn't, so it's hard to weigh that against the fear and uncertainty of walking his own child into a potentially dangerous situation.

Steve walks ahead of them to help load Sam into the plane, and Bucky's heart races with the anxious thought of, *it's now or never.* He's just about to stop walking toward the plane when Peter does, still clinging to his side, inadvertently tugging on Bucky's jacket as the man keeps moving. Bucky blinks and turns around, sees the pale, wide-eyed look on Peter's face.

"Hey," Bucky says, kneeling in front of him instantly, his tone gentle. "Hey, kiddo, what's wrong?"

Peter's eyes stay fixed on the plane, round with fear, before he forces himself to look back at Bucky. "I don't…" he says quietly, his shoulders trembling. "I…"

The realization crashes over him like a wave. Bucky takes Peter's face in his hands and says, as soothing as he can, "It's all right, Peter, it's okay. I know you're scared, but I'm going to be right there next to you, the whole time." Peter's gaze drifts back up to the plane, so Bucky gently makes the boy look at him again. "Hey. You know I'll never let anything happen to you, right?"

Peter nods, giving him a small smile, but the anxiety doesn't leave his eyes. Bucky doesn't know what else to say, but then it hits him.

"Hey." He pets Peter's head comfortingly. "You can do this, kid. You're so damn brave. You already conquered one fear today, right? That Sam guy had a gun, and you *still* took him down. You didn't even need to use the sewing needle. You didn't freeze."

He lets his hands fall back to Peter's shoulders, squeezing encouragingly. "What do you say? A little plane ride isn't as terrifying as that, is it?"

But Peter shakes his head, disagreeing. "No, Dad, that—" Shame fills his voice, for reasons totally unknown to Bucky. "That was—that's not why. It's not because I'm brave, I… I was terrified." He looks back up at him, his eyes wide, his voice trembling. "I didn't freeze because… he was shooting at *you.*"

Grief wracks Bucky's whole body. Of all the things Peter's said that have broken his heart, that one stings the worst. "Peter…"

Peter glances at the plane again, his small body shaking as he forces himself to look back at Bucky. "Dad… I'm scared."

He's about to pull his son into his arms when someone steps up close behind him. Bucky swiftly stands and turns, shielding Peter with his body, but it's only Steve, who puts his hands up to show he means no harm, his face drawn in worry. "Everything okay?"

Bucky opens his mouth to ask if they can have a minute alone, so he can calm Peter down from the

full-blown panic attack he's working himself into, but then his gaze flickers behind Steve at Stark, standing on the stairs of the plane, watching them with a tight, tense expression. Stark eyes Peter with something akin to concern, but then pins Bucky with a heated, judgmental look, and Bucky feels a swell of irritation inside of him, knowing the man probably heard every word Peter said.

Before he can lie and say that they're fine, Peter presses his forehead against Bucky's back, evidently missing out on that hug he knew was coming and now needing the comfort. Bucky drops his gaze from Stark's suspicious stare and Steve's worried expression and turns back to his son, taking Peter under his arm as he starts leading them toward the plane again.

"Deep breaths, Pete," he says quietly to him, his hand a comforting weight on Peter's shoulder. "I'm right here."

Peter clings to his jacket as they climb the steps, both of their eyes widening at how spacious the inside is. Bucky's sure neither of them has ever seen a plane this extravagant before, but he can feel Peter's body pulled tight as a bowstring against his side, and he decides to skip any sort of tour in favor of leading Peter to a pair of seats.

"Do you want the window seat?" he asks, pointing to the curtain above it. "If it's too much, we could always roll down the cover or switch."

Peter nods, so Bucky ushers him into the seat and takes the spot beside him. There's no sign of Sam anywhere, but this plane is so unnecessarily large that it wouldn't surprise Bucky if it had a separate chamber with a bed that Steve and Stark deposited him in.

Bucky and Peter both glance out the window as the sound of repulsors flare up outside. Steve is there, saying his goodbyes to Tony and Rhodey, before the two mean blast upward and out of sight. Steve watches for a moment, then climbs the steps and enters the plane. As the doors shut, the stairs fold up into the belly of the plane like an accordion, and Peter tenses beside him and leans against Bucky harder, as the engine roaring to life can be heard and felt throughout the vehicle.

Steve spots them from the door and makes his way over, observing them, and Bucky can practically feel the doubt radiating off the man. He isn't acting cold, exactly, but the long, disbelieving look he gives Peter has Bucky's hackles raising.

"Mind if I sit?" Steve asks, gesturing to the seats in front of them, facing them. Bucky gives a small nod and Steve sits, the seats far enough apart that there's a solid foot of space keeping their knees from touching.

As the plane begins to move, Peter nestles deeper into his side, so Bucky lifts his metal arm and allows the boy to practically glue himself to him. When the plane's speed picks up and the liftoff begins, Bucky wraps his arm across Peter's chest, feeling the boy shaking against his metal palm. His sleeve rides up and the light pouring in from the window catches on his wrist, drawing Steve's gaze to it. Bucky observes him, tensely, the hardened expression on the man's face deepening.

Then Peter clings to his metal arm, hugging it, and Steve blinks and looks back up at Bucky, meeting his eyes. They study each other for a moment, neither one of them saying a thing, until Bucky pulls Peter tighter against his chest and looks away as the plane leaves the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, you guys. Sorry about the wait. You'll notice I also added some excerpts to this series—they aren't strictly canon to this fic, they're more like drabbles/prompts of things people wanted to see within this AU, so feel free to consider them as canon or un-canon as you'd like.

# Home Is Where You Are

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the first half of the flight, the three of them sit in a tense, awkward silence, Peter staring out the window, Steve staring at Bucky, Bucky glancing between the two. It's impossible to ignore the disapproving look on Steve's face every time his gaze shifts to Bucky's prosthetic, still draped securely across Peter's chest, his eyebrows drawn together like he's watching someone litter in public and can't do anything about it.

Bucky figures that he doesn't owe the man any explanations, and even if he did, there's no reason that conversation has to happen right this minute, in front of Peter. If Steve's gotten it into his head that Bucky shouldn't use his left arm at all, just because of the people who gave it to him, he probably won't be happy to hear that Bucky no longer shares the same deep-seated hatred for it that he does.

He's more than content to just let Steve stew in his thoughts and only focus on keeping Peter calm and grounded for the remainder of the flight, but then the kid starts shifting in his seat, his legs crossing and pressing together tightly. Bucky turns his head to look down the aisle toward the back of the plane, and then lifts his arm slowly as he tells Peter, "There's a bathroom at the back, by the sign there. See it?"

Peter turns his head and sees the sign, then nods. "Is it—is it safe to get up?"

Bucky smiles. "Yeah. It's only when we're lifting off or landing that you're supposed to be strapped in. Mid-flight's okay." He moves his legs out of the way as Peter stands up, sees his hands trembling as he steps into the aisle. "You want me to take you back there?"

"I'm okay," Peter says quietly, sounding anything but. "Be right back." And then he slowly and carefully wobbles to the back of the plane and shuts himself inside the bathroom.

Steve clears his throat the second they're alone. "He seems really nervous. First time on a plane?"

"Yeah," says Bucky, his chest aching in sympathy for the kid, knowing what awful things must be filling his head right now.

"Was he born here?" Steve asks, something off in his voice, not quite matching the words as he says them, like he's really asking something completely different. Bucky eyes him, but answers all the same. "Born and raised in New York."

Then Steve blows his fucking mind.

"Was she a Hydra agent?"

Bucky blinks, not even remotely understanding the question at first. His face twists with confusion. "What?"

Steve looks almost as uncomfortable as Bucky feels. "His mother. Was she a Hydra agent?"

"No? Why would you—oh." The realization clicks in his head like a light switch, Bucky's face flushing slightly at the confused look Steve gives him. Of course the man is totally lost. "It's been a pretty long time since I've thought about him as anything but my kid, but, Peter and I aren't

biologically related."

Steve's face falls, and then an alarming number of different emotions take over his expression—incredulity, disbelief, and then anger. "Buck, are you telling me—wait. Please tell me this isn't what it sounds like."

"What does it sound like?"

Steve outright glares at him. "It sounds totally irresponsible, not to mention *crazy.* Bucky, be reasonable, you can't just—*take* children in because you want them, where did he even come from?"

Bucky tries to take hold of the defensive anger that bubbles up in him, but he can't keep the harshness out of his voice as he replies, "He *came* from an abusive and negligent foster home. And not that it's really any of your business, Steve, but I didn't *take* him. *He* followed *me,* because he was alone and had nobody else. So I've been taking care of him. He's family to me now."

Steve's face softens, but the expression that takes over makes Bucky's stomach drop; in place of the anger and the confusion, Steve looks at him with eyes that are so placating that they feel condescending.

"Buck," he starts, tone gentle like he's speaking to a wounded animal. "Look, I'm not questioning that you care about him, don't get me wrong, but you have to realize, this whole situation is insane. Peter can't stay with you. He isn't yours."

There have been times in the past when Bucky's wanted to hit Steve, he knows that, but those times were mostly the result of Steve being completely reckless or just plain suicidal. This isn't that, the urge that wells up in Bucky now—he knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that this is the first time he's ever wanted to hit Steve because he feels *threatened.*

It's the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard, the notion that Peter isn't his, after everything they've been through, after the thousands of hours Bucky spent working alongside Frank to keep food in his kid's belly and a roof over his head, after Bucky forced himself to do things for Peter he couldn't find the strength to do for himself. How can Steve say Peter isn't his, after Bucky conquered a mountain of traumas born of almost a century of torture for Peter's sake? How can he say Peter isn't his after Peter gave up the only thing that mattered to him—the ability to be Spider-Man and save lives—just to stay with Bucky? How can he not see that just because he doesn't have a fucking piece of paper that says so, he and Peter are closer than most fathers and sons could ever hope to be?

Then again, Steve's only known about Peter for a few hours, and it's not like their dilapidated apartment exactly screamed "warm and cozy." Still though, while Bucky understands the man's doubt, it doesn't make his own reply any less biting.

"You have nothing to say about it," he says slowly, rage dripping off of every word. "Not about me, and not about my kid."

Steve opens his mouth to reply, but closes it again as the door to the bathroom opens at the end of the aisle, and Peter slowly walks back, looking pale and flushed and zapping Bucky's anger out of him instantly. Bucky holds out his hands to steady the boy as he sits back down, and Peter doesn't wait for an invitation before he's leaning against Bucky's side again, curling up on his seat and letting his dad take the weight of his trembling, anxious body completely.

Steve watches as Bucky gently rubs the kid's back and soothes him, lulling him enough that Peter

can fall into a light, fitful sleep, and thankfully chooses to keep the rest of his ignorant comments to himself.

Bucky's sure he learns all he needs to know about Tony Stark by seeing his definition of a *quaint family cottage*. There's nowhere on the property for the plane to land, so it touches down on a nearby golf course driveway—which Bucky suspects the man privately owns—where a car is waiting for them to take them the rest of the way to the "cottage."

He expects a small cabin on a lake somewhere, but as the car journeys down a long, well-maintained road, the houses only grow more extravagant—or, rather, their front gates do. All the actual buildings are backed onto properties too far behind the trees to see, but their gated driveways only become more and more unnecessarily fancy, each one named like they're public property; *Vittito Gardens*, the *Carrington Manor*, a large, eye-catching, hand-painted sign that reads *Pegasus Trail Rides* with a bronze statue of a horse rearing beneath it, and finally, the *Stark Family Estate*.

The car stops to wait for the automatic gate to slide open, and then it's pulling up the driveway, a road so ridiculously long that it's another two minutes before it pulls up in front of a large building. Peter actually sits up when the car stops, ungluing himself from Bucky's side for the first time since they disembarked from the plane. Both of them stare wide-eyed at the large mansion that towers over them, an absolutely gigantic building surrounded by an immaculately manicured lawn, complete with a perfectly-laid cobblestone path and an ivory fountain at the base of the stairs. It's so outrageously garish that Bucky half expects every piece of furniture and décor inside to be made of solid gold.

And he has no fucking idea how Stark could look at a house this ridiculously ornate and think of it as a *cottage.* It's almost as large as Peter's school, for Christ's sake, and that thing holds a thousand people during the week. As they step out of the car, he and Peter step a little closer to each other in the mansion's shadow, daunted.

Steve steps up beside Bucky, and he looks as detached as Bucky feels, eyeing the building with a hint of exasperation visible in his furrowed eyebrows.

And then the large double doors open, and Peter clenches his fist in the back of Bucky's shirt beneath his jacket as Tony Stark steps onto the porch and observes them. "If you guys are done gawking at the outside, maybe consider actually coming in so you can gawk at the inside, instead?" He turns to go back inside, then stops and looks at Steve. "Rhodey doesn't wanna stay, so you can go ahead and leave Sam in the car, Rhodey'll take him home."

Steve turns and looks at Sam through the window, who nods, so he turns back to the house and follows Bucky and Peter into it. The inside is exactly as lush as the outside led them to believe, and the only quality of this entire place that is at all cabin-like is the dark, earthy tones everything has, from the flooring to the furniture. Even the paintings on the wall are tastefully painted lakes and landscapes, all nicely complementing the bronzes and dark browns of the hardwood floors and leather upholstery.

Peter's got a look on his face halfway between excited and scared shitless, but he doesn't say anything, following close behind Bucky as they move from room to room while Stark tours them around. Bucky doesn't say anything either, concentrating on committing the place's floorplan to memory just in case, until they pass by the fourth set of balcony doors so far and Bucky can't help but ask, "How exactly are you going to put this place into lockdown?"

Stark doesn't even turn his head, just continues walking. "AI," he responds blandly with an idle wave of his hand, completely bored. "The entire house and the grounds are being monitored by my AI, Friday. Say hi, Friday."

"Hello," says a gentle female voice from above. Bucky looks up and eyes the ceiling warily, looking for the speakers and cameras, but Peter quietly gasps and fixes his gaze on a tiny black square in the patterned wallpaper, his anxiety forgotten for the moment.

"That's so cool," he quietly says, gaze locked on the little black square. Bucky distantly wonders if he was able to find it so quickly thanks to his heightened senses, or if he really does just have that much of an eye for tech. Probably both. "Hi, Friday! I'm Peter!"

"Hello, Peter," the AI replies smoothly, somehow sounding pleased, which is eerie to Bucky in a deeply unsettling way. "Welcome to your new home. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to assist you."

Peter's excited face falls at the words *new home,* and he glances back at Bucky with a tense and nervous expression. But Bucky's gaze is locked on the back of Stark's head, who swivels around to face them and chuckles nervously, tapping the band around his wrist firmly with his fingers. "Okay, Friday, that's enough. Mute."

There's a beat of awkward silence between them before Stark swiftly and smoothly begins the tour again. The house is huge, but most of it is open—very few walls separate the kitchen, the dining room, the main living room—it's excessive in ways Bucky can't really comprehend. The man stops when they pass a dark staircase with a closed door at the bottom, presumably leading to a basement.

"That down there is my lab," Stark says, and neither him nor Bucky miss the way Peter's head perks up at the word. "It's small, nothing like the one at home, but there is *some* decent tech down there." He smiles at Peter, and the look of excitement he gives his son makes Bucky's hackles raise protectively. "I'll show you sometime."

Before Bucky can tell the man to back the hell off, Peter eagerly asks, "Really?" with wide, hopeful eyes, his discomfort from earlier apparently forgotten. Bucky doesn't have the heart to forbid him, even when Stark's smile widens and he says, "Sure, kiddo," seemingly about to reach out and ruffle Peter's hair. But he catches the look Bucky gives him, and he drops his arm immediately and turns around to carry on the tour.

He knows the heated glare he keeps pointed at Stark's back is unsettling, since the man keeps a sizeable distance between them for the rest of the tour, not even speaking to Bucky directly until they reach the hall of bedrooms. He gestures to two doors next to each other, then addresses Bucky and Peter. "Figured you'd probably want to be next to each other, so these rooms are yours if you want them. They're guest rooms, so they're pretty sparse. But I'm sure you're used to that."

"The fuck is *that* supposed to mean?" Bucky says, noting the way Stark's face pales a little, looking slightly mortified, like he wasn't expecting those words to come out of his mouth either. He schools his features though, and changes his tone for a more jovial, humorous one as he replies, "It means I've seen the inside of your apartment. And also that, luckily for *you,* there's an actual bed in that room that your giant ass will fit in." He turns to Peter and smiles again. "And you'll actually get your own bed, too."

"Um," Peter says in a small voice, glancing at the door like it's a ticking bomb. "Thanks, Mr. Stark."

Bucky puts his arm around Peter's shoulder, feels the muscles relax slightly as Peter leans into him. He wants to tell Peter that it's all right, that he doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to do, that they're safe here and the separation of having different rooms isn't as bad as it feels. But he knows, too, that this whole situation is one he can't control, and the fear of making a promise he can't keep keeps his mouth shut.

The awkwardness of earlier doesn't diminish as the day goes on. The atmosphere between the four of them is tense and uncomfortable, even when Stark leaves to buy provisions to restock the fridge with, and returns later with dinner which no one is really in the mood to eat. Bucky's aware that Peter hasn't had anything to eat since breakfast early that morning, so he makes sure the boy ingests as much as he can, even though he chews slowly and unhurried, drastically unlike him.

He knows just how terrified Peter must be, suddenly removed from their home like this, surrounded by people who want to separate them and who know about Spider-Man's identity. Of course, he didn't tell Peter about Steve's comments on the plane—hasn't had a chance, even if he wanted to—because he knows that would only cement the kid's fears that they might be taken away from each other, and that's the last thing Peter needs.

Dinner drags on until the late evening, and when it's over, the exhaustion of the day comes creeping in with a vengeance. When Peter has trouble keeping his eyes open, Bucky puts his hand on the kid's back and begins leading him to his room, shooting Steve and Stark a pointed look in the hopes that they'll stay put and not linger behind them like they have been all day.

The room he takes Peter to is enormous, easily as big as their entire apartment, and with its own ensuite bathroom as well. Peter blinks owlishly at the large pristinely-made bed, and Bucky comfortingly pats him on the back while gently urging him forward, encouraging him to lie down.

"You've had a long day, huh kiddo?" he asks, taking in the kid's anxious posture. There's a tightness in Peter's face that sets off an alarm in Bucky's gut, like watching a dam that's about to break. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Peter quietly answers, looking at the enormous bed, intimidated. Bucky frowns and ruffles his hair, not used to Peter being too caught up in his feelings to talk about them. "It was pretty scary," he says, trying to encourage the boy to open up. "Especially back at the apartment. I nearly had a heart attack when I saw Steve there with you."

"Yeah," Peter says again, but lighter, a little laugh in his voice. "So did I."

"Did he say anything to you?" Bucky asks, suddenly overcome with the need to know what could have possibly come out of Steve's mouth when he saw a kid alone in Bucky's apartment. Peter's smile widens, and he looks down at the floor, like he can't believe what he's about to say.

"Um," he laughs again, glancing up at him while trying to get a hold of his expression. "He walked in and saw me kneeling behind the counter, and he said, 'Oh, sorry, I must have the wrong apartment.' I kind of went into shock and didn't know what to say. Then you came in."

Bucky shakes his head, smiling at the little laugh Peter makes as he kicks off his shoes and shimmies out of his jeans. "That sounds like him," he says as the boy lies down. "Anyway, you should try and get as much sleep as you can."

"What about you?" Peter asks quietly, crawling under the covers and curling up on the pillow.

“I’ll be right next door,” Bucky says softly, brushing Peter’s bangs off of his forehead. “You can come and wake me up if you need to, okay? Now get some sleep.”

“‘Kay,” Peter mumbles, closing his eyes and relaxing into the mattress, but Bucky can see the tenseness in his neck and shoulders, the stress in his small hand, clenched into a ball around the edge of the covers. Bucky lets his thumb swipe across the boy’s temple one more time before he stands up, turns off the lights, and makes his way back to the living room where Steve and Stark are standing, waiting for him.

Steve looks anxious, standing between Bucky and the couches like he isn’t sure if he should sit down or not. Stark doesn’t deliberate and leisurely sits on the large armchair, but Bucky can see the man’s anxiety in his crossed legs, his bouncing foot. Tony Stark is almost capable of hiding his nervousness, but not quite.

With a sigh and a slump of his shoulders, Steve braces himself for whatever it is he’s decided he needs to say and looks over at Tony, as if garnering some strength at the sight of the man, before turning back to Bucky. “Buck, we have to talk about Peter.”

Bucky’s eyes narrow, but beyond that, he doesn’t react. He knew this was coming the moment they stepped foot on that plane, and especially after their last conversation was interrupted. He glances back down the hallway in the direction of Peter’s room, knowing the door is firmly shut and hoping that they’re too far away for his enhanced hearing to pick up.

“Don’t bother saying it,” he says lowly, his tone even. “I’m not giving him up.”

“Buck, seriously,” Steve pleads, rubbing his forehead, frustration evident in his tight features. “This is insane. It’s bad enough you were in New York this whole time, but to find out you went and took in some kid off the streets when... when you’re…”

“When I’m what?” Bucky asks, defensive. Part of him wants to scream, *you don’t know anything about us,* because it’s true; Steve doesn’t know Bucky anymore, can’t claim to understand him after the long decades of separation they’ve been through. Bucky isn’t even the same person he was when they met two years ago, in DC. Peter made sure of that.

The defensiveness in his voice clearly gives Steve pause, because he softens his expression back to that damn pitying look, his tone sickeningly gentle. “Like I said, Buck, I don’t doubt how much you care about him. He obviously cares a lot about you, too. You guys are clearly attached, and I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that, but you *have* to realize, after everything you’ve been through, after everything Hydra did—after everything they *made* you do—you have to realize that adopting a kid is *not* the solution.”

The *solution.* “What exactly are you trying to solve, Steve?” he says, knowing he’s needling the man further into an actual fight, but too pissed off by his condescending bullshit to care. “I’m not the same person I was in 1942,” he says slowly, staring directly into the other man’s eyes. “Peter doesn’t *solve* that. You want to know what he *does* do?”

Bucky gestures down at himself, not missing the way Steve briefly glances at his metal hand in motion.

“He makes being the guy I am now a lot more bearable,” Bucky continues, dropping his arms. “I didn’t *ask* to adopt a kid. I sure as hell wasn’t looking. But it happened anyway, and I’m not backing out now.”

“Damn it, Buck,” Steve grits his teeth, agitated. “You’re *dangerous*. Please, if you won’t do it for

yourself, then do it for Peter."

"Do *what* for Peter?" Bucky asks, almost raising his voice, but stopping himself at the last second from speaking too loudly. Peter doesn't need to hear this. "What do you want me to do? Kick him back out on the streets? You think that would be doing him any favors?"

Steve's shoulders relax slightly, but Bucky's tense when the man gestures to Stark.

"Tony's offered to take care of him," Steve says, gently, like it's the perfect solution, like he came up with just the right answer that they would all instantly agree on. "He's offered to take him back to New York and look after him until he finds a new home."

"*I'm* Peter's new home," Bucky seethes, almost seeing red from how angry the smug look on Stark's fucking face makes him. "And nobody is taking him anywhere without me. I'm not backing down on this, Steve. You're not taking my kid."

"And what if something happens?" Steve snaps, angry now, rounding on Bucky like *he's* the infuriating one. "What if you slip back into *that* mindset and hurt someone? What if you hurt *him?"*

"Or get him hurt," Stark interjects, much calmer than Steve but just as firm. "You clearly have people after you, and he's already shown that he isn't scared of jumping in front of a bullet to save your life."

The judgmental look on Stark's face almost makes Bucky sick to his stomach, but he doesn't take the bait the man is offering, and instead forces his anger down as he turns back to Steve.

"I would never hurt Peter," he says. "I know that for a fact."

Steve eyes him, his face full of doubt. "How can you know that?"

"Every time I see his face," he says, voice steady, not nearly as surprised by the sincerity in his voice as Steve is. Bucky almost turns back to the hallway, to where Peter's room is, the desire to see him suddenly overpowering. But Peter's not there, he's not within arm's reach, so Bucky steels his nerves and plants his feet, refusing to back down. "That's how I know. Hydra *tried*, Steve. They found us. The guy was one word away from turning me back into a killing machine, and *Peter* pulled me out of it. I broke out of my conditioning because that bastard hurt my son."

A look of surprise crosses Steve's face, layered with doubt, but Bucky's gaze flickers to Stark's stony, suspicious glare behind him, so he doubles down. "The guy was my old handler, and even *he* couldn't make me hurt that kid."

"Your old handler?" Steve cuts in, his brows furrowed together. "Brock Rumlow?"

Bucky raises an eyebrow at him, giving him a one-armed shrug. "Dunno. I never knew his name. Could barely even recognize him, his face was burned to shit."

"Buck, he's dead," Steve says, no small amount of relief in his voice. "He died in the suicide-bombing in Lagos." The confusion must be apparent on his face, because Steve gives him a small smile and continues, "I've spent the last two years dismantling Hydra trying to find you. They're done for, Buck. We haven't found so much as a trace of any remaining factions in months."

Doubt festers deep in his gut, shadowed by no small degree of alarm. "But I thought Hydra was the one who bombed the UN to flush me out?"

Stark doesn't look convinced, but Steve shakes his head with a small shrug. "Rumlow was the final Hydra agent we had to track down. Every base is deserted and every member with any kind of status whatsoever is either behind bars or dead." He looks up at Bucky then, his eyes apologetic and apprehensive in equal measure. "It must have been someone else."

He rubs his forehead with the cool metal of his left hand, his chest feeling tight. It was bad enough when he thought it was Hydra after him, the faceless, insidious thing that's been shadowing him for a lifetime—but to hear that that might not be the case, that there's someone *else* out there even more unknown to him, hunting him down, raises the panic in Bucky's body to an almost unbearable level.

Steve seems content to give him a moment to process this, but then Stark clears his throat and says, "Not to beat a dead horse, but whether or not Hydra is the puppeteer here isn't really the issue."

The two men lock eyes for a moment, before Stark tears his gaze away from Steve and points it at Bucky.

"That fact remains that you have some pretty intense psychological programming rattling around inside your head that nobody knows how to remove," he says, not unkindly, but not with much sympathy, either. "And as long as you do, you aren't safe for Peter."

For the first time, Bucky turns away from Steve completely, directing his reply solely at the other man, along with his cold, hard stare. Stark doesn't flinch, but his body goes very still, unable to hide how unnerved he is by Bucky's glare.

"I'm only going to say this one more time," Bucky says emphatically, the coldness of his voice contrasting the heat of his rage. "I don't know who you think you are, Stark, but you have *no* right to act like you know anything about us."

He takes a step forward, ignoring Steve, his gaze boring into Tony's. "You have no right to say he isn't safe with me. I'm the one who took him in when every other adult in his life failed him. *I'm* the one who kept him from getting shot, who kicked the shit out of a predator when he tried to put his hands on him. *I'm* the one who stayed up all night drying off stray kittens when he brought them home. *I'm* the one who comforted him when he was sad, and praised him when he needed support, and held him when he was scared. I'm the one who nursed him back to health and fucking *bathed* him when he was too sick to move, the one who taught him how to defend himself, the one who exposed himself to *Hydra* in order to give him some semblance of a home."

He stops, up close and personal now, advancing on the man as he spoke, leaning over him as he continues, "He is my son. He is fifteen years old. *You,*" he snarls, "will *never* take him away from me."

Stark looks afraid, but his voice, to his credit, is steadier than Bucky expected.

"Even if he *is* safe," the man says, keeping their gazes locked. "He has no future with you. If you really cared about what's best for him, you'd be man enough to admit that."

Bucky's able to stop himself from physically shrinking away at the blow, held steady by his anger and his pride. He can't admit that Stark is right, that Bucky knows all too well just how much potential Peter has, how far he could go in the right environment, how bright his future would've been if Bucky hadn't been so fucked up. He knows better than Stark ever could just how badly he's holding Peter back, how much of a waste it would be to spirit the kid away to some rural part of the world where his talent and intelligence would fail to be nurtured. Bucky knows, because he's agonized over the thought countless times, what he's depriving Peter of, more than the kid

could ever know.

But in the end, Bucky always has and always will leave that choice up to Peter, regardless of what he wants himself, and he tells Stark as much.

“Maybe,” he says, standing back up. “But that’s not up to you or me. That’s *his* choice.”

Stark’s eyes widen slightly, and Bucky doesn’t miss the hint of challenge shining in them, the undeniably competitive spark. “So if he told you he’d rather stay in New York, without you, you’d let him?”

“Of course I would,” Bucky says, hardening his glare, not liking the implication in Stark’s tone one bit. “Despite whatever you think, Stark, the only thing I care about is his happiness.”

“Well,” Stark says, sniffing indignantly as he turns his head away, “at least we agree on something.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow at that, momentarily struck by the genuine remark, but his attention is stolen by Steve, who sighs and runs his hand over his face, exhausted.

“Let’s call it a night,” he says, eyeing both of them. “We might as well save this discussion until after we hear from T’Challa.”

“Sure,” Tony says, clearly lying. The withering look Steve sends him all but confirms that. The man stands and stretches his back as he says, “I’ll show you where your room is, Cap,” and then he turns back to Bucky. “Hopefully it goes without saying that Friday will immediately alert me if you set so much as a toe outside this building.”

“I wasn’t in Vienna,” Bucky says. “I’m not going anywhere until everyone knows that.”

Steve’s shoulders relax slightly, but Stark gives him an unconvinced look. “Well, thanks for your cooperation, I guess.”

Bucky turns to head back down the hallway, to his room, but stops, barely glancing over his shoulder. “I’m not doing it for you.” And then he leaves the room, momentarily lingering outside Peter’s door, before entering through his own.

Peter’s not a loud sleeper by any means, but the absence of the sounds of him sleeping makes Bucky’s room seem deafeningly silent. There’s a small sitting area across from his bed, below the large bay window, and Bucky finds himself routinely looking over at the couch there, expecting to see a sleeping bag draped across it. But even though the position of the couch and his bed are right, everything else is all wrong; for one thing, the couch in this random guest room’s sitting area is bigger than the one they have at home, angular compared to the rounded corners theirs has, pristine white instead of the grungy brown that was probably green once upon a time.

Bucky lies there as long as he can stand it before his nerves and his restlessness drive him out of bed. He doesn’t care if he’s being observed, if Stark’s creepy robot butler is going to record his every move to report back to Stark in the morning, if he has to lie still on this obscenely plush bed one more minute he’s going to lose his mind.

He doesn’t have to try to be quiet as he leaves the room. Moving silently comes naturally to him, which is probably a symptom of Hydra, but he can’t remember a time when he didn’t. He follows

the hallway to the open kitchen and dining room, eyes easily scanning the room in the dark. His gaze is drawn to a sliver of light beyond the large glass doors leading to the deck, and as he steps closer, he notices it's the reflection of the sky on the water before him. The deck curves to the side, to a backyard that is too dark to be seen, but it also stretches forward in a straight line, turning into a dock that rests on the water. The sky is so beautifully clear, devoid of light pollution of any kind, that it's bright and overflowing with stars, more than Bucky is sure he's ever seen in his life.

Wanting to get a closer look, Bucky reaches out, but stops himself from grabbing the handle to the door just in time. "Hey, house-bot," he says, careful to not be too loud. "When Stark said no setting foot outside, I'm guessing that included the deck?"

"It does," the AI replies, gently. "While the deck is technically part of the building's structure, it is also considered to be an outdoor environment."

"So no fresh air?" Bucky asks, rhetorically, not really expecting an answer. He drops his hand from the door and decides to finish scoping out the rest of the building that isn't "off-limits", when the AI pipes up and says, "I'm afraid I can't allow you onto the deck. However, if I could direct your attention to the window to your right," she says, and when Bucky follows her direction and looks at the wide, spacious bay window on the other side of the dining room, he watches in amazement as the window panes slide back on the front, sides, and top of the window, leaving it nothing more than a wooden ledge suspended over the water, boxed in by a thin mesh screen.

Bucky approaches it cautiously, the cool breeze drifting in from the screens in front of, beside, and above him all at once, bringing with it the scent of water and clear forest air. The ledge is wide enough for Bucky to sit comfortably with plenty of room to spare, and as he starts to climb onto it, he glances up through the screened-in top of the window above him and is blown away by the crystal-clear view of the galaxy.

The sight is so startling and daunting that it almost makes him dizzy, but he swallows his amazement and numbly says, "Uh, thanks."

"You're welcome, Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky stops, blinking, and lifts an eyebrow as he glances around the room, not sure where to point his suspicious look. "Did Stark tell you to call me that?" he asks, feeling somewhat unnerved at the unfamiliar title and the queasiness it leaves in his stomach.

"I am programmed to address Mr. Stark's guests by their legal titles." She's silent for a moment, then adds, "But I can call you something else, if you prefer."

*Anything else,* Bucky thinks, resting his head against the window casing, suddenly struck by the memory of an awful face, peering down at him, smiling, the light shimmering off of his glasses. *Good morning, Sergeant Barnes.* Hands on his skin, warm and damp, closing around the barely-healed socket of where his left arm used to be. *Shall we continue where we left off?*

Bucky takes a deep breath and tries to say, "Call me Bucky," but it comes out as a broken whisper, too defeated and ragged to be heard, surely. But the AI makes an odd beeping noise above him, then softly says, "As you wish, Bucky," and he releases the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding and sinks down onto the window ledge, the stars forgotten.

His left arm fists into the front of his shirt, stretching the fabric irreversibly. His mind is a mess all of a sudden, a swarm of disconnected words, all smacking together as they swirl inside his head. *I'm Bucky, I'm Bucky,* he urgently tells himself, forcing the thoughts through the impenetrable storm, trying to give them shape, make them true. *I'm Bucky.* But it doesn't feel right, it feels

untrue, unlike a lie; it feels like a fact that's been changed, the old version of a new reality. *I'm Bucky…!*

His eyes shoot open at the sound of a door opening, followed by the creak of footsteps rooms away, down the hall. Bucky heaves in a couple of deep, much-needed breaths as he turns his head in the direction of the noises, his mind blanking at the light sound of tentative knocking.

"Dad?" calls a quiet voice, and a door creaks as it's opened. "Dad?!"

"Yeah, Peter, I'm here," Bucky says instantly, pushing off the ledge of the bay window and moving toward the mouth of the hallway. "I'm right here, are you okay?"

Peter comes rushing down the hall, barely managing to stop before he barrels into him. "What are you doing out here? I went into your room and you weren't there!"

"I came out here because I couldn't sleep, I was just taking a look around," Bucky gently says, subconsciously taking Peter's shoulders in his hands to make sure the kid is okay, Peter's wide, terrified eyes setting his already-shot nerves on edge.

"Well then leave a note or something! Don't just—*not* be in your room!" Peter says, anxiety pouring off him, and the frightened sound of his voice mixed with the ridiculousness of his request actually manages to calm Bucky down.

"Hey," he says, cupping the back of Peter's head, running his fingers through his hair to soothe him. "Hey, Peter, you're okay. What happened? Did you have a bad dream or something?"

Peter shakes his head, averting his eyes, looking somewhat embarrassed. "I just… I woke up and you weren't there," he says, his voice small. "And then my room felt really weird and way too big and I just really wanted to see you."

Bucky hugs him, feeling guilty despite the fact that he would never make Peter feel like this on purpose, and sympathetic because he knows exactly what Peter means, that in this backwards situation the only thing they have that is familiar and any source of comfort is each other.

"You can stay out here with me if you want," he says, an idea coming to him. "Actually, yeah. Come here, you'll love this."

He guides a quizzical Peter back over to the bay window, and gestures for him to take a seat when the kid glances at him questioningly. Bucky smiles when the confused look deepens on Peter's face, and then he points upward and watches, grinning, as Peter looks up and his eyes widen in astonishment.

"*Whoa.*"

Peter's mouth opens in a silent gasp as he takes in the vast sky, brightened by trillions and trillions of glimmering white stars. His face is illuminated by the pale, cold light settling down on them both, so Bucky can easily see the anxiety and stress in his features melt away to wonder, to amazement, and it's the best feeling in the world.

"Hang on a second," he says as he walks over to the sitting area and grabs the throw blankets draped across the back of the armchairs, carrying them back over to the bay window, unnoticed by Peter, who still hasn't looked away from the sky once. Bucky smiles and wraps one of the blankets around his kid's shoulders, then takes his own seat in the corner of the ledge, Peter resting against his knees.

“This is amazing,” Peter breathes, pulling the blanket tighter around himself. “I didn’t know stars actually looked like this without a telescope. I thought it was just in movies.”

The smile on his face doesn’t waver, but an insidious doubt crawls up the back of Bucky’s neck, dampening the moment. He observes the gentle look on Peter’s face, his wide-eyed gaze, his amazed smile, and feels a stab of shame as Stark’s words come flooding back to him.

*He has no future with you.*

Part of him doesn’t believe it, because he knows Peter, and Peter has a future no matter where he ends up. That’s the kind of person he is, his genius, his work ethic, his compassion. He’s the kind of person who makes everything around him better—if he ended up in a backwards village with dirt roads and a single well, Bucky doesn’t doubt for a second that Peter would make it a paradise, smiling the whole time. That’s the goodness of Peter, really, in a way that Bucky has never seen before; he makes everything he touches better, like magic, born of an inherent desire to do good and the drive to bring that good to life. He’s the opposite of Bucky, who has only wrecked everything he’s ever laid his hands on, and it burns him up inside that Tony Stark knows it.

His attention is brought back when Peter lightly shivers, and he rests his metal hand on the kid’s shoulder, gently tugging him in when he looks at him. “Come here,” he says softly, and turns Peter so his back is to his chest, more than enough room on this ridiculously spacious window ledge for Peter to sit between his legs, curled against his chest, one blanket wrapped around his shoulders and the other laid across their laps.

Peter sighs deeply and relaxes in Bucky’s hold, pulling his arms tighter around him contentedly. Bucky rests the back of his head against the wall, tipping his head back to look up at the stars, Peter’s hair tickling his throat as the boy does the same.

“Peter,” Bucky says quietly, hating the words about to come out of his mouth. “You don’t have to be here if you don’t want to be.”

Peter tenses. “What do you mean?”

“You could go home,” he says, hugging him tighter. “To New York. You could stay in school and wait for this to blow over until I can come back to you.”

A long, silent moment passes between them, and Bucky is sure that the next word out of Peter’s mouth is going to be, *Okay,* or some other variation of agreement. But what Peter actually does is take a watery breath, voice on the edge of tears, and sadly whisper, “I *can’t* go home.”

“What do you mean?” Bucky asks, reluctantly letting Peter sit up and turn around, hating his son’s crushed look and the sight of his wet eyes.

“To our apartment,” Peter says, a little firmer. “To Queens. You don’t get it. Why would I go back there without you? They’re just places now.” His eyes brim with tears, but he fights with everything he has to keep them from falling. “It was the same thing when Ben and May died. They took me to the apartment to grab my stuff and everything looked different. It was just a room with things in it, even though I’d grown up there and it was the only home I remembered. It *wasn’t* home anymore.”

Peter reaches forward and trails his fingers along the grooves and indentations of Bucky’s metal hand, resting on his knee, absentmindedly, like he isn’t aware he’s doing it. Bucky flips his hand over so the back is resting on his kneecap, palm up, so he can feel Peter’s small hand outline the metal better.

“It would be the same thing if I went back to our apartment now,” Peter says, sniffling. “It’d be the same thing if I went back to foster care, or stayed with Ned, or anybody else. It’d just be places filled with things and people. It wouldn’t be home.” He looks up at him then, so stubborn, but begging Bucky to understand. “We could go to Mongolia and live in a yurt and *that* would be home, because *you’d* be there.”

Bucky closes his hand around Peter’s, relishes in the warmth that spreads through his fingers.

“I *do* get it, Peter,” he says, coaxing him back into his arms, hugging him even tighter against his chest. “You aren’t the only one who feels like that. It’s the same for me. The world was just a place filled with people until I found you.”

Peter hugs him, and Bucky lets his cheek rest against the top of the boy’s head, feels the brush of his soft curls against his skin. “I was just existing until I met you. And now the only thing I give a damn about is making sure you’re happy, and healthy, and safe. I’d give my right arm to avoid being separated from you. But I’d do it if it’s what you wanted.”

“It’s not what I want,” Peter begs, voice layered with tears again. “I don’t care where we are, Dad. I just want to stay with you.”

“You’re staying with me,” Bucky promises, wrapping the boy in his arms and hugging him, holding him against his chest, rocking him gently. “You’re staying right next to me, kiddo. I promise.”

Peter curls up tighter in his arms, sniffling, and Bucky shushes him and wraps the blanket around him again, his metal fingers lacing in the boy’s soft head of hair as he cradles him. Eventually Peter relaxes, head against Bucky’s shoulder, his arms and legs lax, spread across Bucky’s own, his breathing silent and even in the depths of sleep.

Bucky waits a little while longer, just enjoying the moment while it lasts, the gentle breeze across the water, the sky full of stars above them, Peter peaceful and safe in his arms. Then he slowly threads his arm under the boy’s legs and lifts him, bridal style, into his arms, carrying him delicately out of the room and back down the hallway, to the boy’s bedroom.

Peter softly sighs as Bucky lays him down, but makes no other sound or sign of waking, so he pulls the blankets back over his small body and tucks him in, kneeling beside the bed as he brushes the hair away from his eyes. Peter curls up tighter on his side, nestling into the pillow, and Bucky smiles and presses a quick kiss to his temple, his head full of thoughts of how much he loves this kid, and all the good and bad things that come along with that; the joy, the fear.

Finally he stands back up, giving Peter’s head one last gentle pat, before he turns to leave and stops at the sight of Steve standing in the doorway, watching him, his expression unreadable. Bucky stares back, trying to make sense of the look on Steve’s face and the fact that he managed to sneak up on him, but then Steve silently nods his head down the hall, walking away, gesturing for Bucky to follow him.

Chapter End Notes

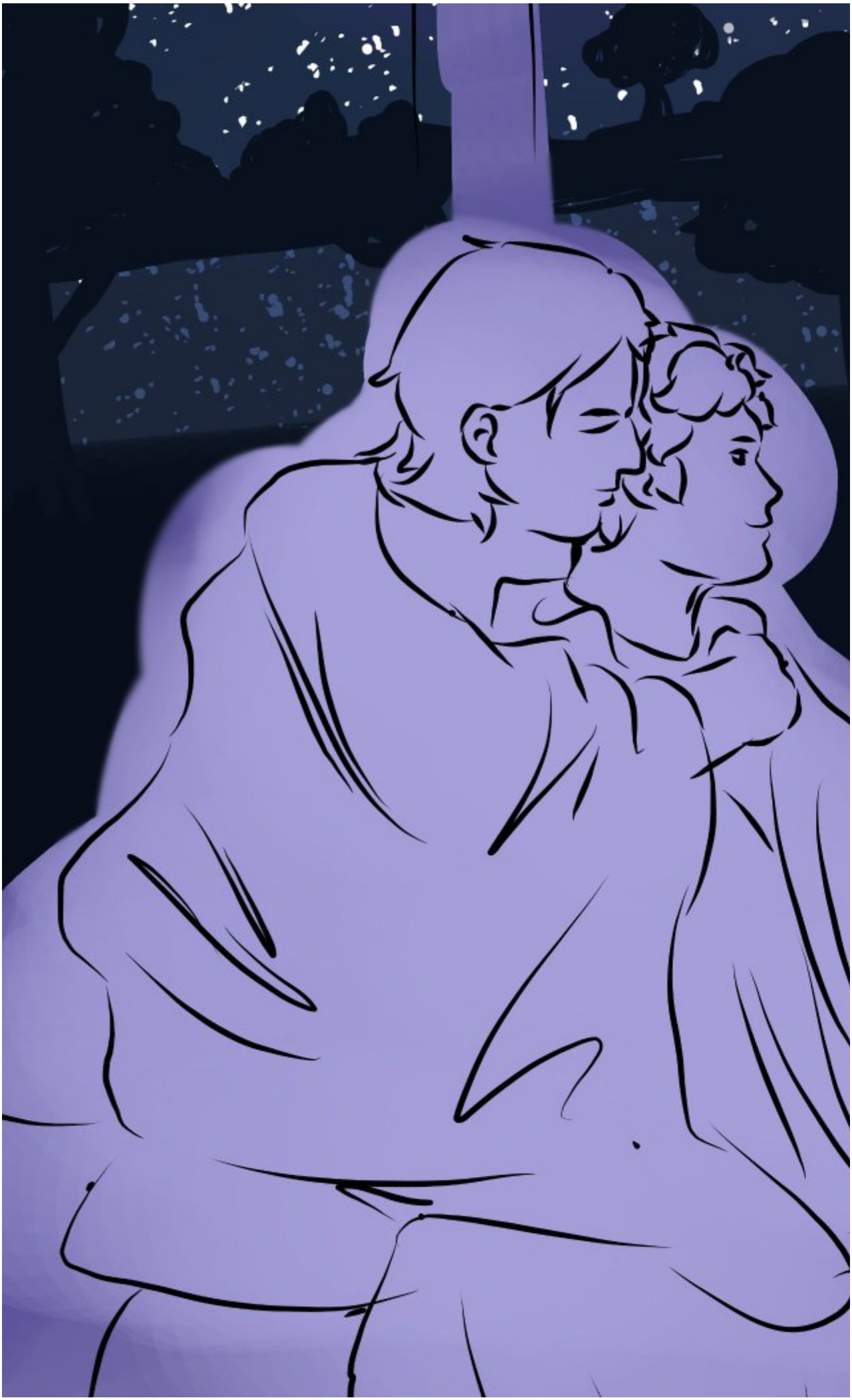
> Peter and Bucky have had a very long day, and Steve is a dirty liar who doesn't go to bed when he says he's going to, that asshole. ( - Bucky, probably.)

Thanks for reading, guys! I'm finally back on schedule so I hope you'll look forward to the next chapter, where Bucky steadfastly retains his position of "Nobody touch my kid or I'll kill you," Peter just wants everything to be okay, Steve tries his hardest to understand and Tony becomes everybody's favorite character.

(Also sorry for the lack of replies to your comments on the last chap, ao3 was bugging out and wouldn't let me, sob.)

Edit: HUGE THANK YOU to my dearest friend and server grandma (ao3, twitter)
FOR MAKING THIS GORGEOUS FANART FOR THIS CHAPTER:







# A Father's Love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He follows Steve wordlessly through the stretch of hallway leading away from Peter's room, until they come to the door at the end of the hall and Steve opens it, waving him in. Bucky enters, unsurprised to see a bedroom as impersonal as his and Peter's are, the bed untouched, as if Steve hasn't so much as sat down on it yet.

Bucky moves out of the way and stands there as Steve steps in, shutting the door behind him. They haven't been alone together since those few minutes on the plane, so Bucky eyes him, not really knowing what to expect, finding it difficult to place the expression on the other man's face. Steve looks tired, but also like there's something he needs to say, can't rest until he does.

"I'm sorry."

Bucky looks at him sharply, caught off guard. "What?"

"I'm sorry," Steve says again, earnestly, locking eyes with him. "I'm not trying to coddle you. I didn't mean for it to seem like I was."

There's a thread of something in his voice that doesn't sit well with Bucky at all. "So you don't think I'm dangerous?" he asks dubiously, letting the *for Peter* go unsaid, knowing Steve realized it was implied. Steve's face tightens into an uncomfortable grimace, fighting with himself not to avert his gaze.

"I'm not sorry for what I said," he says slowly, reluctant. "I'm sorry for how I said it."

"Oh."

The word hangs between them for a moment, neither man really knowing what to do with it. Steve shifts on his feet before plopping on the edge of the bed with a sigh, head bowed. "I've had to convince myself that you've changed, that you're not the same person you were seventy years ago." A rueful smile crosses his face, but there's something undeniably tortured in his expression. "But I shouldn't treat you like you're fragile, either. You would have punched me for that back then."

"I'm tempted to punch you for it now, if that makes you feel better," Bucky says, and can't keep the slight grin off his face when Steve looks up at him, one eyebrow raised, before his own smile breaks across his face and they both chuckle, diffusing the tension somewhat.

Bucky sighs and takes a seat beside Steve on the bed, a sudden nervousness overtaking him. It's dizzying to actually be here, sitting beside *Steve,* laughing at a joke together. It somehow feels wrong, like he's breaking a rule, going against the current. There's a coil of anxiety constricting in his stomach, but Bucky steels his expression and pushes down the urge to flee.

"I know you don't think I can handle it," he says, keeping his gaze facing forward. "But I've *been* handling it for a year. And not with much difficulty, for that matter." He can't help the quirk at the corner of his lips, the proud smile that surfaces. "Peter's a good kid, that has a lot to do with it."

"It's just hard to process," Steve says honestly, clasping his hands together in his lap. "Two years ago I found out you were alive, and… what Hydra had done to you. And then you disappeared.

And I spent all my time tracking down every base, every agent I could find, expecting to find you taken prisoner again somewhere. But you were in Queens, living in an apartment, with a teenager who calls you *Dad.*" Steve turns his head and looks at him, deeply, like he's searching his face for any hint that he's not really Bucky. He lifts a hand and Bucky goes very still, watching, eyes honed in on the man's fingers as they lightly brush against the long hair falling across his shoulder. Their eyes meet as Steve says, "I thought I would never see you again."

Bucky swallows, turning his head away, letting Steve drop his hand. He knows it must have been hard for him to have Bucky come back from the dead, but to hear the grief so vividly in his voice makes him feel sick with guilt.

Steve, composing himself, says, "I'm trying to understand, I really am."

"I know," Bucky replies softly, a part of him screaming that he shouldn't say too much, and the rest of him aching to tell Steve everything. He feels defensive over the last two years of his life, of the memories he's made and the things he's been through. They weren't perfect, but they're *his;* they're *his* memories and *his* experiences, and something deep inside him desperately wants to keep them safe, protected.

But he also wants Steve to know.

"It's been a long couple of years, Steve. I was purely relying on my instincts for that first year after DC."

Steve is tense, but he shifts slightly beside him, opening up, and Bucky can practically feel how much the other man is hanging on every word he's saying, so he continues. "I didn't really have a plan. I was just going with the basics; acquire shelter, food, and that meant income. I worked odd jobs, got by on donations, scavenged for the rest. I wasn't really thinking about anything beyond *survive* and *lay low so Hydra can't find me.*"

A somewhat hurt look crosses Steve's face, but he doesn't say anything. Bucky tries, but can't keep the smile off his face as he says, "And then, one night, I was walking home and I heard some commotion in an alleyway. I started walking towards it before I even knew what I was doing, and there was this *kid.*" The smile widens, he can't help it, the joy of getting to tell the story of how he and Peter met for the first time. "This small, scrawny, stupidly brave kid, taking on a whole gang of punks in his pajamas and a homemade mask. He was holding his own, but it was pretty obvious he had no idea what he was doing."

Steve's face softens, the way Bucky thought it might. "I didn't want to get involved. But then one of the guys pulled a gun on the kid, and he froze. I moved without thinking, let the gun fire into my hand to block the shot. And then I found out that he took on all these guys to try and get someone *else's* wallet back, and all I could think was, what's wrong with me? How do I always end up finding these selfless, reckless little punks with no sense of self-preservation whatsoever?"

They share a laugh, before Bucky eagerly carries on. "I didn't want anything more to do with him at first. He followed me home, and I pretty much slammed the door in his face. I already felt like I had taken a stupid risk by exposing myself. I had no intention of making it any worse."

He leans forward on the bed, resting his elbows on his knees, his smile completely gone. "But the way he looked at me, Steve, I… I couldn't understand why a kid would be so thrilled to spend time with somebody like me, but he was. And he kept coming around, and every time he did, I got so caught up in trying to figure out *why* that I didn't realize I had really started to care about him."

"What about his parents?" Steve asks. "What happened to them?"

“I wanted to know that too,” Bucky replies, wistful. “He was coming over so often that I started thinking his parents were either absent or didn’t give a shit. It would explain why he was so eager to spend time with me.”

Guilt wells up in him then, remembering how he used to distrust Peter, used to think the kid could possibly have ulterior motives when the truth is so much worse.

“When I finally asked him... “ Bucky starts, stops, the memory making his chest feel tight, hating even thinking about how hard Peter had cried in his arms that night. “I found out that his parents died in a plane crash when he was little, and his aunt and uncle, who took him in, had just been shot and killed a few months ago. I found out he’d been bounced around between foster homes, and abused, and thanks to his mutation and his healing factor, he couldn’t make anyone take it seriously. So he finally ran away and had been living out of his school when I met him.”

“That’s awful,” Steve says, the sympathy clear as day in his voice. He looks a little torn, like half of him wants to agree that Bucky did the right thing, and the other half refusing to. “That’s a lot for a kid to take.”

“Yeah,” says Bucky. “And I kept wondering when it was going to be too much for him, but he just… kept going. He became Spider-Man, spent his time helping total strangers when he wasn’t hard at work at school, and he always did it with this smile on his face, and I realized, he’s probably the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

“You really love him,” Steve says, realizing. Bucky meets his eyes, wanting him to see the sincerity in his words. “Yeah. And I wanted—I *want* to be better for him. How could I let myself fall apart when Peter hadn’t? I didn’t want him to have to carry everything by himself anymore, so I stepped up.”

He smiles again, warm, a small inkling of satisfaction settling within him at the slightly speechless look on Steve’s face. “So I took a job, started working as a mechanic for this older couple who own a small dealership. They fell in love with Peter even faster than I did, and things were really good. I worked, Peter went to school, in the evenings we’d train and Peter would do his patrol as Spider-Man. We had all these little traditions, like making dinner together and walking this lady’s dogs on Saturdays, and stopping at our favorite sandwich shop when we didn’t feel like cooking. I can’t explain what that normalcy did for me. I’d never felt like a human before.”

Something changes in Steve, then. His body goes a little tense, but his face is open and full of confusion, on the brink of understanding, so Bucky doubles down, needing him to finally *get it.* “I never *wanted* anything, Steve. I wasn’t living. I was just keeping my body alive and running from Hydra. And I thought that was enough, but… Peter made me want more. When I look at him, all I can think about is all the things I want to give him, the life I want him to have. We started referring to each other as father and son when people found out we were living together, but I started thinking of him as my kid long before that.”

“And you never…” Steve starts, trailing off, waiting until Bucky turns and looks at him again before he continues, “you never… thought about reaching out to me? Not once?”

Bucky gives him a remorseful look, knowing the answer the man is looking for isn’t the one he can give him. “Once,” he says, apologetic. “Peter suddenly came down with a fever that wouldn’t break no matter what I did. I couldn’t take him to the hospital, and it got so bad I thought he was going to die. I was just about to bring you and the rest of the Avengers down on us, even if it meant letting you arrest me, when he finally came to.”

“You thought I would arrest you?” Steve asks, visibly surprised. He looks maybe a little offended,

but Bucky simply pins him with a *look* and says, “Steve, the last time I saw you, I *shot* you.”

“The last time you saw me,” he replies, “you pulled me out of that river.”

“Yeah. And I didn’t know why. I knew even less about how you’d react if we ever saw each other again.”

“Well, for the record, this…” Steve gestures around them, lips pulling up in a small smile, “is not at all how I was expecting it to go.”

Bucky laughs, unable to help it, the ridiculousness of this truly bizarre day sinking in. “Yeah. That makes two of us.”

A moment passes between them, quiet, but not awkward. Bucky starts to feel the long hours of the day take their toll on his body, and though he’d die before admitting it, part of him *is* looking forward to sleeping in an “actual bed,” as Stark put it. He feels the need for sleep creep into his muscles, the heaviness settle around his eyes.

“I want to help you,” Steve says, restoring him to wakefulness. Bucky turns and looks at him, regards him closely, on edge. He hates that a small part of him expects Steve to say, *but only if you let Peter go.* The Steve he knows never would. But neither one of them are really the man they once knew.

“After we find out who was responsible for Vienna and why they framed you…” Steve continues, “I want to help clear your name, get that Hydra programming out of your head, somehow.”

“Let me make it clear,” Bucky calmly says, “I’m willing to cooperate. I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t. But I’m not changing my mind about giving Peter up, and *he’s* my first priority. He comes first, do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, and the small smile he gives him almost gives Bucky a reason to believe him. “I hear you, Buck. I’m on your side. If you say it’s Peter first, then it’s Peter first.”

Steve tentatively puts his hand on his shoulder, squeezes, such a familiar and simultaneously alien thing. Bucky meets his eyes and searches them, wondering if Steve feels it, too; if he finds this moment somehow reminiscent and foreign at the same time.

But Steve expels that thought by patting him again and saying, his voice full of promise, “I’m with you till the end of the line.” He holds Bucky’s gaze, so like Steve, trying to show he means it. “Both of you.”

Bucky wants, against every anxious nerve in his body, to believe him. So he gives a small nod and lets his guard down, slightly, his shoulders relaxing, his metal fist unclenching against his leg.

“Okay.”

Exhaustion pulls him under quickly, but the sleep is light and fitful for most of the night. Bucky wakes up several times and glances at the white sofa, his heart constricting each time he sees it bare, before he remembers where they are, that Peter is sleeping soundly in the next room. He tosses and turns, dozing for only a short few minutes at a time, before he notices the sun beginning to rise behind the sheer-white curtains framing the window, and can’t lie down any longer.

He has to admit, the view is amazing from his room. Dense trees fence around a heavily-landscaped backyard that stretches down to the water's edge, and the lake is so vast and dark in the early morning light that Bucky can hardly see the shore on the other side. There are birds floating in circles by the dock, with heads bowed like they're still sleeping, no one awake yet in this remote corner of the world except Bucky, it feels. Mist crawls along the top of the water in smoky white clouds, making everything seem cold.

*Hope Peter's warm enough,* he thinks, eager to suddenly go and check. He makes it to the outside of Peter's door before he thinks better of it. They had a long day yesterday, and it's early, and he wants him to get as much sleep as he can, he needs it. Back home it wouldn't matter if Bucky checked on him while he was asleep; they shared their lives in two rooms. But here, behind a closed door in a ghostly quiet room far from civilization, the slightest noise will probably wake Peter up, and Bucky doesn't want to disturb him by opening the door to check.

He decides instead to take another look around the estate, taking note of every vantage point from every window. The house is eerily silent, in a cold, dormant way. Bucky strains to hear a single sound, but there's nothing, not even the creak of a bed. He almost heads to Peter's room again, but before he knows it, his legs have taken him outside of Steve's door.

It's a little surprising that Steve isn't awake yet—although, for all he knows, maybe he is. Steve could be awake, lying there restlessly the way Bucky had, his mind going a mile a minute trying to figure out what to do.

Bucky can't bring himself to feel sympathetic. Steve's always been like this; always taken personal responsibility for things that just aren't his business, ever since they were kids. It doesn't surprise him that Steve would feel accountable for his actions, that he would take it upon himself to keep Bucky safe from the world and the world safe from Bucky, like he has a right to intervene in the things he feels need intervention, under the umbrella excuse of "it's the right thing to do."

But he knows it's not really that simple, either. This is more than Steve wanting to protect an "innocent" man, and if the situation were reversed, he would probably be trying to keep things under control for Steve just like Steve is for him. He knows it's cynical to disregard what they mean to each other, and if Steve knew that Bucky doesn't even really consider them friends anymore, it would probably crush him.

The guilt of that thought takes him away from the closed door, out of the hallway. He passes by another large window and sees that the sun has risen a little higher and the mist is breaking up over the lake, bringing a hint of more warmth to the world. He decides to make himself useful and heads to the kitchen to get a head start on breakfast, intending to make Peter eat as much as he can when the kid wakes up. He didn't eat enough yesterday, after all, and Bucky always starts feeling trapped in his own skin when he thinks of his kid going hungry.

He eyes the contents of the fridge with no small amount of suspicion. Stark has been *weirdly* generous since the moment they got here, and the fully-stocked shelves of more food than Bucky can even catalogue is just another warning bell ringing in his head. It would be one thing if the man seemed wary or nervous of them and was trying to buy their cooperation, but he doesn't—save for yesterday, when Bucky leaned over him and got in his face—Stark seems more *annoyed* by his presence than afraid of it.

So the fact that he would treat them like guests and not prisoners is unsettling, to say the least. What motive or angle could he possibly have? If Hydra is really dismantled like Steve claims, it's not like Bucky has a wealth of valuable information to hand over. Could it have something to do with the Accords? Could Stark be trying to lure them into a false sense of security so he can use

them as leverage in his negotiations? Or use them against Steve? If the news reports Peter and Ned had been talking about were correct, then Steve has been pretty vocally against signing anything since the king of Wakanda proposed the idea. Maybe Stark has seen this whole thing, from the moment Bucky was framed, as an opportunity to change Steve's mind, or force his hand?

Bucky sighs and turns the element on, preparing to cook the large meal. The theory seems wrong, even to him. There's definitely something devious about Tony Stark, but the idea that he would be masterminding some insidious plot to blackmail Steve, of all people, just seems ridiculous. There is a chance, of course, that the man is just trying—in his own way—to be genuinely nice and accommodating, but that doesn't fit, either. He has no reason to treat a "terrorist" like him with this level of hospitality.

So if his motives are neither good nor evil, what are they?

Bucky stops in the midst of frying the bacon. Maybe this isn't about him at all. Maybe Bucky has absolutely nothing to do with it, and all of this, from the moment he saw them at the shipment yard, has been about *Peter.*

Nausea fills his stomach. Stark had known about Spider-Man, had addressed Peter directly every single time he showed them any level of welcoming, from describing this place to their bedrooms to the food and even his lab. He had presented all of that to Peter, not Bucky, but *why?* What could he possibly be after that would make him offer, not once, but *twice,* to take Peter in?

A flurry of horrible, dark thoughts fills his head. Stark could be after anything, and none of them are good. He could want a prodigal son of his own, a genius and a hero, to be the heir to everything he's built. He could want a new Avenger, someone to join the team, to idolize and follow him. *Or he could want…*

Bucky steps away from the hot stove and lets his arm whirr and flex out the agitation building within it. A moment of cold dread washes over him that instantly spikes into blinding hot fury, making his head spin and his teeth clench. The rational part of his brain pipes up and says that he has no idea if it's true, that Stark could just be an overly-friendly weirdo who likes kids, that Peter is small and frightened and maybe the man was just doing his best to make things as easy as possible for him, but the rest of him, the fiercely protective side, is already thrumming with a violent urge unlike anything he's ever known, unlike anything *any* side of him has ever known.

*I'll kill him,* Bucky thinks, frightened that he means it, how easily that thought entered his mind. He doesn't know this part of himself. Was the old Bucky Barnes this violently protective, or is this new? Is this a symptom of the things Hydra had done, or was he always capable of this kind of anger? And what would Peter think if he knew, if he found out that his dad had, for a moment, been so overwhelmed by the urge to kill his childhood hero that it left him light-headed?

Bucky tries to take a deep breath, broken from his thoughts at the loud *snap* of the sizzling bacon behind him, drawing him back to the present; to the warm, bright kitchen, the smell of food, the sun beaming down on the sky-blue lake stretched beyond the window, the green of the forest, the chorus of birds singing. He tries to focus on all that, to let the rage go, let the anxiety seep away as he focuses on here, now.

Trampling down on the anger and the fear, Bucky finishes cooking breakfast pretty much on autopilot, not letting his thoughts drift from his actions, his movements. When everything is ready, he covers the plates to keep them warm and heads down the hall to wake Peter.

He raps softly on the door, gently calling, "Pete? You awake?"

No answer comes, so Bucky knocks again, a little louder. “Hey, kid. Time to get up, breakfast is ready.”

There’s still not a sound, so Bucky frowns and grabs the doorknob, offering up a slight warning of, “I’m coming in,” before opening the door. The emptiness of the bed hits him instantly, sloppily made, like Peter didn’t do much more than pull the comforter back up to the pillows. “Peter?” he calls, looking to the door leading to the ensuite bathroom and seeing the door open, the light off.

Bucky looks up to the ceiling, not bothering to waste time searching for the little black communication box for the house’s AI. “Where’s Peter?”

“He is in the basement with Mr. Stark.”

Heart thundering, Bucky forces himself, with every fiber of his being, to keep calm as he demands, “Doing *what?”*

The full second of silence before she answers only inflames him.

“I have been instructed not to tell you.”

Bucky bolts for the stairs, his left arm shaking, his vision red.

The door to the lab is shut, but Bucky can hear Peter’s voice inside, can hear the quiet lilt of him speaking. It does nothing to deter him as he throws the door open, his hand crushing the metal handle like putty. Both Peter and Stark turn and fix him with wide-eyed stares, and the anger and fear settles in him somewhat when he sees them sitting a good distance apart, a table between them, merely talking.

“Peter,” he says immediately, unable to keep the distress out of his tone. “Are you okay?”

Peter raises an eyebrow at him questioningly, and glances down at himself, confused. “Yeah?” he half-says, half-asks, clearly not comprehending why Bucky would ask, before he looks back up at him and his eyes widen slightly. “Are *you* okay?”

Bucky eyes them a moment longer, letting the realization sink in that it’s not what he thought, that everything’s all right. “Yeah,” he says, his nerves fried, leaving Peter looking unconvinced. “Breakfast’s ready. Go on up and eat before it gets cold.”

“Uh, okay,” Peter says, and he looks back at Stark and smiles at him, warm and genuine. There’s a large paper bag on the table in front of him, and Peter lifts it and tucks it protectively under his arm as he stands. “Thanks again, Mr. Stark.”

“No problem, kid,” Stark replies, his shoulders a little tense, his hands fidgeting on the table. “You’re welcome to come down here whenever you like.”

Peter grins, clearly excited, totally missing the heated glare Bucky pins the man with. “That would be great!” he says, then walks over to Bucky, bag in hand, already ready to talk his ear off. “Dad, this place is amazing, it’s way more advanced than the robotics lab at school! Ned would totally freak out if he was here.”

“I’m sure he would,” Bucky says, nodding his head toward the stairs. “Go on, off you go.”

The kid's face falls slightly, and Bucky feels a pinch of guilt, hating to shrug him off like that. "Aren't you coming too?"

Bucky looks up, catches Stark's gaze and holds it. "In a minute," he says.

"Okay," Peter says again, sending Stark another grateful smile before he leaves the lab and begins climbing the stairs. Bucky releases the crushed doorknob and silently closes the door behind him.

"Peter tells me you're quite the handyman," Stark says, eyeing him flippantly. "Which I hope is true, because otherwise I'm going to bill you for that."

"I'd be less concerned about your house and more concerned about your skeleton, if I were you," Bucky replies coldly.

"Excuse me?"

Bucky moves forward, watching the man tense the closer he gets, until he's standing on the other side of the table with his palms flat against it. Stark leans back, trying desperately to look unaffected, but his legs cross and his fingers drum against the tabletop even quicker.

"I've been trying to figure out what you want," Bucky says quietly, his tone steady and cold, his gaze even more so. "Wracking my brain to understand what it is you want from my kid. And I gotta be honest, no matter what conclusion I come to, it isn't *good.*"

He leans a little closer, his left hand coming up to grab the man's shoulder when he tries to lean back, holding him still, letting him feel the grip and pressure of his hand.

"*I hope it goes without saying,*" Bucky copies him, "that if you ever, *ever* touch that kid, Stark, there isn't enough money, technology, or superhuman strength on this *planet* to save you from me." He tightens his grip, watches the man's face twist in pain. "I will kill you. Don't forget that."

The pain on the man's face is muddled somewhat by something else, something that gives Bucky a moment's pause, trying to make sense of it. Beneath the pain, Stark looks *surprised,* and not in the way he had when Bucky barged in on them. The surprise turns to confusion, for a second, and then to Bucky's bewilderment, becomes *offense.*

"What the fuck," Stark says, batting his hand off his shoulder. Bucky lets him. "Are you seriously giving me the shovel talk right now?"

Bucky frowns. "What are you talking about?"

"What are *you* talking about?" Stark stands up, looking so genuinely insulted that Bucky's train of thought derails. "I'm risking my neck to keep your cyborg ass out of a Wakandan prison and *this* is my thanks?"

"What did you expect me to think?" Bucky says, standing up straight, feeling chastised by the other man's anger and ridiculous for it. "You've been weirdly *invested* in him since you laid eyes on him, you kept offering to take him in, and then you snuck him down here and told your robot butler not to tell me why? That doesn't seem suspicious as fuck to you?"

"Maybe to you," Stark says, not contentiously, holding his hands up in surrender. "But I'm on the other side of that, Barnes. You think *my* actions seem suspicious to *you?* How do you think *yours* seem to *me?"*

"What?"

Stark looks at him flatly and gestures to the door, as if Peter were still standing there. “I’ve been looking for that kid for days, and when I find him, it’s with an internationally-wanted terrorist assassin who, at *best,* isn’t able to control his actions one-hundred-percent of the time.” He holds up a hand, starts listing things off, counting them with his fingers. “In the less than twenty four hours I’ve been observing you, I’ve seen you get *violently* protective—although, I’m more inclined to call it *possessive*—I’ve seen you guys cuddle *way more* than any teenager should want to with an adult they’ve only known for a year, I’ve watched him display more than enough signs of anxiety to label it a disorder, not to mention the fact that he’s clearly had his growth stunted, I know you guys shared a studio apartment straight out of a horror movie, and on top of all that, he seems *completely* dependent on you.”

“He’s my kid,” Bucky argues, offended, though Stark hasn’t even really accused him of anything yet. “Of course he’s dependent on me.”

Stark eyes him, calculating. “You seem pretty dependent on him, too.”

“What are you saying here, exactly?” The calmness in his own voice surprises him. “Yeah, we’re closer than normal families are and we take comfort in each other probably a lot more than normal families do, but that kid’s been through a lot. You have no idea what Peter’s survived.”

“Yeah,” Tony says. “I do.”

Bucky’s eyes narrow, his posture defensive, in spite of himself. “If you knew as much as you say you do, you would know that Peter isn’t in danger with me.”

The man’s face changes, slightly, looking almost, to Bucky’s confusion, *remorseful.*

“I do know that,” he says softly, prideful, seemingly forcing himself to meet Bucky’s eyes, “...now.”

“What?”

Tony sighs, withdrawing, moving away from the table over to a desk with a holographic monitor on top. “I don’t think you’re dangerous for him,” he says, reluctantly, like he can’t stand to admit that he was wrong. “I was quick to judge.”

Bucky can’t keep the surprise out of his voice. “That’s not much of an apology.”

The man turns and fixes him with a wide, disbelieving look. “Uh, *hi,* you just accused me of being an actual monster, where’s *my* apology?” He honest-to-god presses his hand to his chest, dramatically, and Bucky is physically incapable of stopping himself from smirking. “As well as the whole aforementioned keeping you out of *jail* and probably from being executed thing? A little gratitude would be nice.”

“I’ll thank you for your hospitality when you stop trying to take away my kid,” Bucky tells him honestly, bringing the tone of the conversation back to a more serious one. “And when you tell me why the hell you’re so interested in him.”

Tony’s expression tenses like he’s trying to control it and failing. He drops his gaze, rubs the back of his neck in shame or embarrassment or both and says, “I was going to adopt him.”

*“What?”*

For a moment, the man doesn’t speak, like he’s fighting with himself to work up the nerve. He fidgets again, then sighs, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

“Spider-Man,” he sighs again, not clarifying anything. He pulls out his phone at Bucky’s confused expression and displays a holographic screen, thumbing over the buttons until a video starts to play. Bucky’s heart stops, watching the looping footage of Peter the day he caught that bus, landing in front of it just in time, taking the full weight of it. The video stops just before Bucky burst out of that crowd, running over to him, and he can’t tell by Tony’s face if he knows about it or not.

“When I saw this video I thought, damn, that kid has some skills. So I asked Friday to start saving anything she could find relating to this Spider-Man, in case we ever needed his help.”

He closes the video and puts the phone away, his back still tense. “When this whole Accords crap started, I casually remarked that maybe it was time to bring Spider-Man into the mix, and Friday told me he hadn’t been seen in months.” Tony eyes him then, not unkindly, but severely. “And I got worried. Kind of beat myself up a little bit over the fact that I hadn’t bothered to check in sooner. It didn’t take that much investigating to figure out his secret identity.” He grins at Bucky, teasing. “For a smart kid, he never realized there are more than enough cameras in alleyways and on rooftops. Got enough footage of him slipping his mask off to compile a profile, and then the database did all the work.”

Bucky sighs, resisting the urge to drop his face into his hands, and the other man widens his grin at him, before composing himself. “Once I had a name, I started looking at his history, and…” Tony trails off, his gaze lost in the middle distance. “Well, being an orphan myself, I admit I had a soft spot for him pretty much right away.”

Regarding him, Bucky sinks down into the chair Peter had occupied before, listening.

“I felt compelled to help him when I read that his parents died. But when I saw that his aunt and uncle had died too, and that he was in the system, well.” Tony hoists himself up to sit on top of his desk, his elbows resting on his knees. “I made the call immediately, inquiring what I had to do to apply to adopt him.”

“Why?” Bucky asks, unable to help himself. “Peter’s not the only orphan in New York. And you hadn’t even met him yet.”

Tony smiles, clasping his hands together. “Hadn’t met him, but I had detailed notes from his school advisors, counsellors, past teachers, you name it. The only thing that stuck out was the frankly moronic report his social worker made up, which, to put it lightly, did not paint Peter in a very good light. It was so completely different from everything else everyone else had said about him that I had to look into it. And when I realized that the whole thing was bullshit, and that not only had this kid been orphaned twice but also abused and called a *liar* for it, well. I really didn’t have a choice but to step in.”

“Step in?”

“The way his social worker should have,” Tony explains. “I went to every foster home and investigated them myself. It wasn’t hard to see the signs of abuse, since I actually used my eyeballs.” The dryness in the man’s voice is humorous, somehow, but neither of them laugh; Tony looks tense with anxiety, Bucky feels pulled tight with anger. “I made some calls to ensure none of those bastards ever get to come near a child again, but I didn’t find Peter. The last home I visited was some kind of creepy boys’ home with this awful old religious lady running it, and she was totally fucking useless. Took ten minutes of showing her photos of Peter for her to remember she hadn’t seen him in over a year.”

Two things well up in Bucky at the same time—rage that Peter was ever in the hands of such people in the first place, and relief that he found him when he did.

“So the only place I had left to look was his school, but this whole thing blew up—sorry, no pun intended—with us being asked to bring you in and Steve freaking out and going AWOL. If none of this had happened, I would have shown up at his school and asked him if he wanted to come stay with me.”

“Why?” Bucky asks again, still filled with suspicion, despite recognizing the sincerity in the other man’s tone. Tony looks at him, more honestly than he has up till now, regarding Bucky like he isn’t completely put off by his presence for the very first time since they met.

“I know how tough life is when you don’t have family,” Tony says, like it’s killing him to do so. “Or worse, when you think you have family but they’re only using you. I didn’t want that to happen to him. So maybe I find it interesting that a kid could go through that kind of hardship and still be described by everyone around him as a ray of sunshine, sue me.” He shrugs, trying to look nonchalant, but Bucky realizes that *something* has made Tony feel responsible for Peter, in ways he thought no one else could understand. “Thought he was worth meeting, at the very least.”

“Look,” Bucky says, sighing, resting his arm on the table, the weight of the metal beginning to bother him. “I get that you’re… just trying to help, but regardless, trying to separate us is out of line. I don’t care how good your intentions are. You’re not taking him.”

The man glares at him, holding out his arms like he’s gesturing to the room around them. “Does it look like I’m trying to *take* him? For God’s sake, Barnes, your bedrooms are only separated by one wall. You’ve been pretty vocal that we keep you together, and we *have.*” His defensive scowl deepens, revealing harsh lines in his face that weren’t there moments ago. “Yes, I offered to look after him. Keyword there. *Offered.* What kind of child-snatching goblin do you take me for?”

“You seemed pretty adamant that he *couldn’t* stay with me yesterday,” Bucky replies, narrowing his own gaze. “You didn’t particularly seem to care what either of us wanted so long as *you* got to do *the right thing.*” A quality the man seems to share with Steve, infuriatingly.

“You’re constantly one sentence away from killing people against your will,” Tony shoots back, but his scowl slips away and a calmer, almost compassionate look takes its place. “Forgive me if I thought leaving a child in your care wasn’t such a great idea yesterday.”

Bucky blinks, his eyebrows furrowing. “Yesterday?”

“Yeah, well,” Tony says quickly, hopping down off the desk and stretching his back, fidgeting. “Like I said, quick to judge. Don’t get me wrong, you need professional help before I’ll be completely comfortable letting you parent a kid, but getting you that help is at least something I *can* do. Probably.”

He lets a moment of silence pass between them, then asks, “What did Peter say that changed your mind?”

“It wasn’t what Peter said,” Tony says. “It's what you said.”

“What I said?”

“Last night,” he clarifies. “Sorry, yeah, I was listening. Again, sue me, I’m just trying to be diligent about letting an assassin run loose around my house. Anyway, I heard you give Peter a choice, to get out of this whole thing, and I realized something.”

“What’s that?” Bucky asks.

Tony looks down at the floor, stalling his answer, and when he looks back up and meets his gaze,

his face is filled with a startling amount of emotion.

“There are lots of kids out there who don’t have parents that love them,” he says. “I’m not about to take one away from a parent who does.”

By the time Bucky leaves the basement and heads back upstairs, he’s not sure how to feel about their imprisonment in this strange place and their even stranger imprisoner. Part of him still deeply distrusts the man and his supposed good intentions, but another part, a somewhat incessant part, had been sort of—well, for lack of a better word—charmed by his bluntness and his seemingly genuine desire to help. He can see why Steve likes and trusts him so much, for whatever that’s worth.

But he still doesn’t know how he really feels, about either of them. Steve seemed more open to changing his mind after realizing how good Peter is for Bucky, and Tony seemed more open to changing his mind after realizing how good Bucky is for Peter, and he knows he should be grateful for that, but he can’t bring himself to let his guard down, not completely. There’s too much anxiety still, too much protective fear, telling him to be ready every second for the other shoe to drop, to have a plan to take Peter and run at the first sign of trouble.

That tenseness and anxiety abates, for a little while, at least, when he turns the corner and sees Peter standing there in the kitchen, bathed head to toe in the sunlight streaming in from the large, open windows. There’s something about it that makes him look *safe,* wrapped in light like this, fiddling with the microwave, a peaceful expression on his face. He looks like nothing can hurt him here, and for a moment, Bucky lets himself believe that’s true.

“You didn’t eat?” he asks, watching Peter swap the two equally-full plates in and out of the microwave. Peter looks at him over his shoulder and smiles, a little embarrassed, and says, “Uh, yeah, sorry. I wanted to wait for you.”

“It won’t taste as good reheated,” Bucky says, though it’s too late to do anything about that now, he supposes.

“Shouldn’t have taken so long then,” Peter teases, laughing and ducking out of the way as Bucky playfully flicks him.

They sit down to eat at the large island bar, and Peter wastes no time jumping right in to the excited rant he’s probably been dying to start since he left the lab. “Did Mr. Stark show you his 3D printer? It’s way more advanced than the ones we have at school. I swear it’s straight out of Star Trek! Ned would go crazy if he got his hands on it. I can only hope he’d use his genius for good.”

“You guys will have a lot to catch up on when we go home,” Bucky says.

Peter smiles, but his shoulders deflate somewhat, and he sighs, looking down at his already empty plate. “I wish I could call him.”

Bucky gently ruffles his hair as he stands and takes the dishes to the sink. “I know, kiddo. I wish you could, too.”

“Do you think we’ll be here a long time?” Peter asks as he joins him at the counter and starts helping rinse and dry the dishes while Bucky washes.

“I’m not sure,” he replies honestly, feeling his unease creep back in. He glances down at Peter and

resists the temptation to bombard him with questions, not wanting him to pick up on Bucky's distrust of their temporary housemates any more than he already has. Regardless of what conflicts may arise between him and Steve and Tony, there's no reason Peter needs to know about any of it, it would only stress him out even more.

Bucky sighs and drains the water out of the sink. "Peter," he begins reluctantly, drying off his hands. "Look… I know Stark's been pretty accommodating and generous, and he's helped us out in a tight spot, but I want you to know, you don't have to do anything he says."

"I know," Peter says, following his lead and wiping his own hands. "I already told him I'm not going with him."

Bucky flinches, surprised. "You did?" he says, Peter nodding. "What did he say?"

Peter grins then, wide, bright and excited, and he bends down and picks up the paper bag he left resting against the counter and holds it open for Bucky with an overjoyed, "He gave me this."

Bucky peeks into the bag. "What is it?"

"One sec." Peter turns and dashes for the hallway. "I'll show you!"

It takes a minute, but then Peter steps out of the mouth of the hallway, back into the room, and Bucky stands up straight and looks him over with wide, astonished eyes. "Holy crap, kid, look at you…"

"Right?" Peter says, and Bucky can hear the grin in his voice, but he can't see it beneath his red mask, skin-tight like the rest of the suit, red and blue with a faint webbed design and large, white eyes that are utterly fitting of the name *Spider-Man.* "He made you that?"

"Yep," Peter says, pulling the mask up to his forehead, and he looks so genuinely *happy* that it startles Bucky. He looks at home in the suit, comforted, like he belongs with it. "Isn't it awesome? It's so high-tech. I want to web-sling around so badly."

"Ceilings are high enough in here," Bucky jokes. "Seriously though, Peter, it looks good on you. Bout time you had an upgrade." He smiles, but feels a touch of insecurity blooming in his chest. He never would have been able to gift Peter something like this. "No more poorly-sewn sleeve extensions for you."

Peter laughs and finishes pulling his mask off, then stops and glances behind Bucky. Bucky turns and follows the line of his gaze, sees Steve standing there, watching them. The man smiles and enters the room with a polite, "Good morning."

"Morning," Bucky says, feeling weird about it as soon as it leaves his mouth.

Steve comes up beside him and stops, observing Peter curiously. "New suit?"

"Uh, yeah," Peter says. Nervous. "Mr. Stark gave it to me."

Surprise colors Steve's face. "When? Just now?"

Peter nods, and Bucky's about to tell him to go change, to give him a way out so he can calm his nerves, when Steve smiles again and asks, "Well then, how about we have a little sparring match so you can try it out?"

Chapter End Notes

For those of you interested in joining a winter!dad chatroom thingy, I made a discord and would be happy to invite y'all... as soon as I figure out how lmao. My username is pansley#9912 if you wanna add me and chat with me there. :^)

# Becca

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve leads them to a spiral staircase at the other end of the house, descending down into a spacious gym beside the garage. Bucky scans the open room with more amazement than he would ever admit, not recognizing over half of the machines and equipment Stark has set up around the perimeter of it.

The center of the room is covered in thick blue gym mats, creating a pool-sized arena probably meant for wrestling or sparring. There's a couple of punching bags haphazardly lying in a pile against the rack of weights, Steve's shield leaning against them, and he smiles sheepishly and tidies them up, moving them out of the way, slipping the shield onto his arm. "Sorry. I wasn't really expecting anyone else to come down here."

"It's okay," Peter says, his mask already pulled back down to cover his face. "This place is huge."

"Yeah, a lot of this stuff is brand-new, too." Steve glances at the equipment, which must've cost thousands and thousands of dollars, Bucky guesses, giving a slight shake of his head with a small, fond smile. "Tony kind of outdoes himself when he gets excited. He's been trying to get us to come here for years."

Peter perks up. "You mean—he built this place for the Avengers?"

Steve turns back and looks at Peter, *really* looks at him, like he's examining him. There's no hint of distrust or wariness on his face—on the contrary, Steve seems almost *surprised* that Peter would pipe up and ask him a question unprompted, and Bucky realizes this is the first conversation the two of them have had with all the cards on the table, and all things considered, it could be going much worse.

"I think his family's owned this place for a long time," Steve answers, "but he did some renovating after the team formed in case we needed it."

Bucky can't see Peter's face, but he would bet good money that the kid is starry-eyed under his mask, beaming and overwhelmed to get to hear about his heroes "behind the scenes" like this.

"Now," Steve says as steps onto the mats, not bothering to change out of his t-shirt and shorts; they must have been what he was wearing when he was down here earlier. "You should do some warm-ups before we do a little one-on-one. You haven't tried the suit out at all yet, right?"

"Not yet," Peter agrees, staying off the mats as he stretches the way Bucky showed him, loosening his muscles and readying his body for the physical activity. Something like approval flashes across Steve's face watching him, and Bucky almost rolls his eyes. Steve's always been such an old man, even when they were kids.

It surprises him, that he knows things like that. Things like Steve, ten years old, pestering him and the rest of the neighborhood kids to wear their helmets, even when they were only bicycling in front of their houses, even though Steve was the only one in actual danger of getting hurt should he fall. He remembers things like that, Steve nagging them, hassling them, always leading and advocating for what was right, but he can't remember his family's apartment in Brooklyn, what his parents looked like. He doesn't even know if he *had* parents, though he supposes he must have.

He remembers a few things. A red-headed girl in a blue dress, smiling at him, blushing. Steve getting the crap kicked out of him, Bucky jokingly accusing him of enjoying the pain. Small hands, pale and thin, they fit right into the palm of his own.

Bucky hasn't spent this much time thinking about his past in the two years he's been free of Hydra, and part of him is terrified of it, terrified to remember too much, like he's just asking for a crack to form in the fragile personality he's done his best to construct. But he can't help the fragments of memory trickling in, the little thoughts that pop into his head every time he looks up and sees Steve's face.

Peter hesitantly steps onto the mats, the white eyes of his mask wide and honed in on Steve, who lifts his shield and grins at him. "Don't be nervous, I'll go easy on you."

"Uh, okay."

Bucky almost laughs. Peter doesn't sound convinced, but more than that, it's pretty clear that Steve is woefully underestimating him. The kid used to be able to go toe-to-toe with Bucky back when they first met. Now, after a year of training almost every single night? Steve's in for hell of a wake-up call. Bucky wonders how much Stark has told him about Peter, if anything. How much the man knows himself.

"All right, come at me!"

Peter hesitates for just a moment. Bucky can tell he doesn't really want to do this, yet he could have said no and he didn't. Maybe Stark said something to him, something to make him feel like he needs to prove himself here, to show them he's not helpless. Bucky would understand, if that was the case. The two of them doubting his ability to be a father has brought out the same stubbornness.

He taught Peter well, to always wait for your opponent to make the first move, and how important blocking and countering attacks are, not just to keep yourself in control of the fight, but to wear your opponent down even faster. Peter is cautious as he waits for Steve to make the first move, ignoring the man's command for him to strike first.

Steve looks vaguely impressed, Bucky can see the way he's calculating behind those narrowed eyes, deciding his best move. He lowers his shield from in front of him and smiles again, the barest hint of one on his lips. "All right, then. If *you* won't come to *me*—"

He throws the shield devastatingly fast, and Peter falls for it, just like Steve wanted him to. He catches it, distracted by the force, and then Steve is on him, swinging fast enough that Peter scarcely avoids the blow. Peter drops the shield and jumps, gaining distance, knowing his best shot is to go for mid-range attacks, and he aims his webs for Steve's feet to immobilize him.

But Steve was expecting that, it seems. He grabs his shield in time to block Peter's webs, and they stick to the smooth surface, giving Peter the slight upper hand as he yanks on them and rips the shield out of Steve's hands.

Peter lands on the mats, standing up straight, the shield fastened to his arm. He momentarily looks away from Steve, down at the star emblem painted on the front, reverently running his fingers over the shining metal. "Man, this thing is so much heavier than it looks!"

"Peter, focus!"

The boy's head snaps up, an apologetic, "R-right, sorry!" falling from his lips at Bucky's call,

before he's distracted once again by Steve charging at him. The man is fast, and Peter aims his web-shooter at the man's feet but doesn't have enough time to shoot before he's on him. He lifts the shield to block Steve's offending blow, but Steve easily moves back, lifts his leg, and plants his foot squarely in the center of the shield, kicking both it and Peter away forcefully.

Peter lands with a groan, the shield rolling away, but doesn't stay down long. He puts his palms flat against the floor above his head and flips himself up, on his feet, wrists already aimed at the man charging him again.

*That's it, kid,* Bucky thinks, playing the moves out in his head, watching raptly. *Let him come to you, then immobilize him. Just like we practiced.*

Peter shoots his web up, toward the ceiling, leaping over Steve into the air. From behind, he shoots another web that catches onto the man's wrist, restraining one of his arms. Steve spins around and whips his shield up, flying past Peter dangling from his web.

"Ha!" Peter laughs, the web holding him up in the air in one hand and the web restraining Steve's arm in the other. "You missed me!"

Steve smirks.

"Did I?"

The large white eyes of Peter's mask blink, and he glances up when an unsettling *crack* sound echoes throughout the gym, his gaze landing on the shield, imbedded in the ceiling beside his web, cracking the drywall hazardously.

"Oh," Peter says as the crack widens, flakes of drywall falling and landing on his shoulder. "*Sh*—"

The ceiling breaks, Steve's shield and Peter's webs hurtling toward the ground. Steve takes the opportunity to pull his wrist free, since all of Peter's attention is spent trying not to plummet to his death, and he catches his shield effortlessly while Peter manages, thank fuck, to land somewhat gracefully on his feet.

This time, it's Peter who attacks first. He stays half-crouched on the floor as he aims both wrists at Steve's chest, and the man lifts his shield to block the webs from hitting him just in time, but that, Bucky knows, is exactly what Peter was hoping for. He yanks hard on the webs to throw Steve off balance, surprising the man with his incredible upper body strength, knowing he would refuse to let go of his shield, and Peter uses the opportunity and momentum to string up Steve's ankles and send him sprawling to the ground, hard.

Steve narrowly raises his shield in time to once again block an incoming web aimed for his arms, but Peter leaps and lands on top of it, light as ever, and uses his wall-climbing ability to pull the shield right from Steve's hands as he backflips off the man, turning in the air to web his hands to the floor as well, rendering him effectively pinned. Peter lands on his feet, straightens his back, and clutches the shield to his chest, victorious.

Bucky *does* laugh now, unable to help it after seeing the vaguely stunned look on Steve's face. Peter rushes over immediately, helping to free him of the webs holding his arms and legs, and Steve sits up and regards Peter like he's completely confused by his presence.

"Hell of a fight, kid," he says, still searching Peter's face like he's trying to mentally dissect him. Peter pulls up his mask, still slightly out of breath, his face damp and reddening at the praise. He smiles, shyly, his cheeks pink. "Um, thanks, Captain. I mean—" Peter's shoulders hunch slightly,

keeping his gaze averted. “Y-you too.”

Steve smiles. Bucky can see it, the budding fondness, remembering his own thinly-veiled amusement back when he and Peter first met, when the kid couldn’t make it through a single sentence without stuttering. Steve lifts a hand, gently, and affectionately rubs Peter’s head, ruffling his curls. “You’re a lot stronger than you look, I underestimated you. We should train together again while you’re here. Maybe you could show me a few of your moves?”

Peter looks up at him, his eyes slightly wide, and Bucky smiles warmly at the obviously star-struck expression on his kid’s face. He gazes up at Steve with wide, adoring eyes, the admiration in them shining clear as day. “Really?” he asks, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice. “*You* want to train with *me?”*

Patting the boy’s head again, Steve’s smile widens, amused. “Of course. I’d be honored to train with the renowned Spider-Man.”

Speechless, Peter swallows down the lump of surprise in his throat, his face still completely disbelieving. “Wow,” he says, whisper-quiet. “That would be *awesome,* Captain.”

“Call me Steve,” Steve says as he stands, before helping Peter up as well. Peter graciously accepts the offered hand, and then he smiles up at Steve with a look that’s so familiar Bucky’s breath catches. He knows that face, that beaming smile, those star-struck eyes. Peter gazes up at Steve the way he normally does to Bucky, that childishly hopeful face, the unmistakable excitement visible in his features.

Steve appears a little taken aback by it himself, considering that, before the fight, Peter seemed too shy and nervous to even *look* at him directly, much less beam as if he hung the sun in the sky. Bucky shakes his head, fond and exasperated, watching Peter gaze adoringly at the guy he just knocked on his butt two minutes ago.

“So what’s your first impression?” Steve asks, gesturing to the mask in Peter’s hands. “I’m sure Tony will want to hear how the first test drive went.”

“I think he’ll be more concerned with the hole you made in his ceiling, personally,” Bucky chimes in, making Peter’s face pale and Steve laugh sheepishly. Both of them glance up at the very hard-to-miss crack above their heads, and Steve puts his hands on his hips, frowning. “If I show you how to hang drywall, do you think you’d be willing to climb up there with your wall-sticking abilities and help me patch it?” Steve asks, giving Peter a playful smile.

Peter laughs a little, but nods, the color returning to his face. “Dad’s showed me a little before. We had to patch a wall at home when he tripped in the middle of the night and stuck his hand through it.”

Bucky groans, sending his kid a sour look before reaching over and flicking him, playfully. “Yeah, and whose fault was that? I’d been telling you to pick up your damn textbooks all day.”

The kid grins at him, a little apologetic, but mostly amused, and Bucky doesn’t miss the intimate way Steve is observing him suddenly, like he’s caught sight of something he’s trying to understand, one eyebrow raised and his gaze fixed on him, examining.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but before we get to work on that I need a shower,” Steve says, finally tearing his eyes away from Bucky. Peter runs his fingers through his hair at the back of his neck, grimacing. “Ugh, yeah, me too.” He turns back to Steve, smiling. “Should we—do you want to meet back down here, after?”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” Steve claps him on the shoulder, making Peter beam. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Okay.” Peter starts to head for the stairs, but looks back at Bucky and says, “I’ll be back down in a couple minutes!”

Bucky nods at him, so Peter continues on his way, leaving him and Steve alone as he leaves the gym. They watch him go, then Bucky sees Steve smile from the corner of his eye, and he turns and looks at the other man, curious.

“It’s strange to watch you two,” Steve says, still smiling. “And at the same time, it’s not. You’ve always been good with kids.”

“I have?” Bucky asks, genuinely curious and more than a little surprised. The closest thing to a kid he can find in his memories is Steve, who barely ever managed to grow taller than five feet.

“Well, yeah. Even when we were little, the younger kids always used to adore you. Do you remember Becca’s friends chasing you around the playground? We used to hide under the slide so they couldn’t find us.” Steve’s smile widens, failing to notice that Bucky has gone very, very still. “Peter kind of reminds me of Becca, especially at that age. You used to flick her just like that when she was getting on your nerves.” He laughs a little, giving his head a small shake. “Do you remember that one time—”

Steve finally looks at him and stops, abrupt. Bucky drops his gaze to the ground, turning away from him, his mind on fire. Something is wrong. He doesn’t know what, but every inch of his body is suddenly screaming, a warning bell he can’t turn off or ignore.

“Bucky?” Steve’s hand gently touches his shoulder, and he flinches and pulls away. “What’s wrong?”

He doesn’t know. All he knows is that he can’t breathe, that suddenly his chest is filled with liquid cement that’s slowly solidifying. Inhaling shakily, Bucky moves away from Steve and leans against the wall, his legs numb. What’s happening? Why is he panicking?

Sweat forms on his brow as Bucky quickly scans the room, but there’s nothing here, nothing except him and Steve. He’s safe here, he *is,* so why does it feel like he’s falling a thousand feet? His knees wobble dangerously, he almost sinks to the floor, nothing holding him up except sheer determination. Nothing has changed, so why is his mind on fire? Was it something Steve said? What had Steve said?

*Becca.*

A strangled gasp claws its way out of Bucky’s throat as his legs give out, crumbling gracelessly onto the floor. He can feel the cushiony mats under his knees but everything else is white, his mind, his vision, everything. He presses a hand over his eyes, gritting his teeth, groaning through the hot pain stabbing the inside of his skull.

It’s small, but it’s there. A single memory. Bucky shakes to try and keep it away from him, he doesn’t want to remember. But it plays anyway, the briefest of flashes, long brown hair tied in a ponytail, a face smiling up at him. *Bucky!* Handing him something, her hands were so small. A baseball? She dropped it into the palm of his glove, his own hands were twice the size of hers. He remembered throwing it, how she swung the bat and missed. *Come on, Becca. Even Steve can hit it harder than you.*

Something halfway between a sob and a cry of pain leaves Bucky’s mouth as he bows forward, his

head feeling like it's splitting in two. The memory erupts inside his mind like a volcano, scalding everything else, every other thought and inclination swallowed up by its wrath. He can hear a voice, incessant and urgent, but doesn't know why, what it wants or who it is.

*Becca.* Bucky suddenly feels cold, chilled right down to the bone. He flexes his flesh hand against the mats underneath his body, but he swears he can feel cool metal, biting on his bare skin, pressed against his back. A face above him, cruel and vile, a smarmy grin. *Please.* Bucky pleading even though his mouth tasted like it was full of blood. *I have to go home. My sister's waiting for me, she's all alone.* The face laughing at him, moving away, shining a blinding white light into his eyes.

A hand falls on his shoulder, the grip so firm he can't pull away from it. "Bucky." He knows that voice, it cuts through the stabbing pain behind his eyes, but the word makes his stomach heave. *I'm not.* "Bucky!" He tries to pull away again, but a second hand grabs him, starts lifting him away from the wall. "Come on, Bucky, breathe, just take a deep breath, you're okay."

*Don't call me that,* he begs, a horrible memory, an electric current running over his body. He grits his teeth together so hard his ears ring.

"Bucky—"

A boy, small, frail, gazing at him curiously, big blue eyes and blond hair mussed in every possible direction. *What kind of name is Bucky?* He liked him, he liked him right away, he knew he wouldn't laugh. *That's what my sister calls me.*

"Becca," Bucky sobs, his head hanging, gripping Steve's arm so tightly he can feel the man's bone beneath all that muscle. His head falls forward, he can't keep it up anymore, his body sagging against the man's chest in front of him. "Oh, god, *Becca.*"

An arm circles around him, pulling him tighter against Steve's body. Bucky's metal hand slowly eases its grip on the man's arm, so Steve wraps that one around him too, until he's holding him securely in a firm yet warm hug. Bucky allows himself to go limp, lets the panic leave his body, though it takes his strength with it and he slumps, his vision darkening.

The room is uncomfortably bright when Bucky opens his eyes. He blinks, squinting, and lifts his hand to block the offending light from scorching his eyes, turning his head away and burying half of it in his pillow.

Wonderfully soft fabric rubs against his cheek and Bucky frowns, confused. He feels the space around his body, feeling nothing but smooth material and luxuriously soft cushions, until at last he braves opening his eyes in the blinding sunlight and sees that he's lying on a bed.

That doesn't seem right. The last thing he remembers, he was down in the gym, with Steve. He and Steve were talking, after Peter had left—

*Peter.*

Bucky sits up abruptly, groaning as his head throbs. He presses his left hand against the burning skin of his forehead, finding relief in the cool metal of his fingers.

"Are you okay?"

Startled, Bucky drops his hand and looks up, sees Steve standing there, a worried expression on his face. The man holds a glass of water out to him, waiting for Bucky to take it before he sits on a chair beside the bed. “Easy. You blacked out pretty hard.”

“What happened?” Bucky asks, but before Steve can reply, he cuts in, “Where’s Peter?”

“He’s with Tony,” Steve answers gently, nodding his head to the glass of water, silently asking Bucky to drink some. He obliges. “He freaked out pretty bad when I brought you upstairs. Tony decided to take him down to the workshop to distract him until you woke up.” His face tightens, an uncomfortable, slightly guilty grimace. “We, uh, had to lock him out of the room.”

“What?”

Steve sighs, his shoulders sagging. “I don’t think he believed me when I told him you were okay,” he says, his tone downtrodden and miserable. “When I told him you just… had an… *episode,* he shouted at me that this has never happened before, that I must have done something.” Steve looks so guilty that Bucky doesn’t doubt the man has started to think that’s true. “We were worried what kind of, well, *mindset* you’d be in when you woke up, so we decided it’d be best if Peter was somewhere safe.”

“I see.”

Bucky’s about to open his mouth to tell Steve off, to rip him a new one for frightening and worrying his kid the way he had, but the words die in his throat when he sees the hand-shaped bruise circling Steve’s right arm. That wasn’t there before, and Bucky falters, trying to remember what happened, when the hell he could have grabbed Steve that tightly. He tries, but all he can remember is standing in the gym, Peter leaving, Steve smiling at him. “Did I do that?”

Steve follows Bucky’s nod and looks down at his arm, at the mark. Their eyes meet again when Steve lifts his head, and the man slowly and delicately asks, “What do you remember?”

“Nothing,” he says, causing Steve’s brows to furrow. “I just remember we were in the gym. What, did I just—collapse or something?”

A somewhat tortured look crosses Steve’s face, before he ducks his head and admits, “I started mentioning stuff from our past. When we were kids. I don’t know what happened, you—you didn’t take it well.”

Bucky looks away from Steve’s guilty face, but all he can focus on is the painful-looking bruise painting the man’s skin. A vivid and insidious shame blossoms deep in his gut, making his head feel slightly cloudy, the guilt dizzying him. “I’m sorry.”

Neither of them says anything. Bucky stares down at the glass of water in his hands, feeling Steve’s eyes on his arm the entire time. He knows the man is only capable of seeing it as a part of Hydra, permanently affixed to his body. He wouldn’t be glaring at it so hatefully otherwise.

“You know,” Bucky starts, looking down at his metal palm. “I used to hate this arm.”

Steve looks up, one eyebrow raised, suspicious. “Used to?”

He nods, turning his hand over, eyes skimming all the familiar ridges and edges making up his digits.

“For that first year after DC, I hated looking at it,” he says, his tone painfully honest. “Every time I did, all I could think about was all the lives I’d taken. All the horrible things Hydra made me do.”

He looks back up at Steve, his shoulders relaxing, a small smile tugging at his lips. “But now, when I look it, I think of Peter on the first night we met, frozen stiff with a gun to his head. I think of how I was able to block that shot, and everything that came after. The first time I saw his face. The first time he smiled up at me, what that felt like.”

Steve looks at him, closely, his eyes searching Bucky’s. Trying so hard to understand.

“When I look at it now, I think of how, if I didn’t have this arm, I would have lost him, before I even knew him. And when I think about that, Steve, it’s impossible for me to hate it. I know Hydra used this arm to do a lot of terrible things. But *I* used to it to save my son.”

He can see the beginnings of a reluctant surrender crawling up the other man’s shoulders, Steve leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, sighing. He looks defeated, and more than a little ashamed of himself, but Bucky can’t bring himself to blame him. This, he knows, hasn’t been easy on either of them.

“I need a shower,” Bucky says, sliding off the bed and stretching the muscles in his arms and legs. “And then I need to go rescue my kid before Stark can finish signing the adoption papers.”

*That* brings a smile to Steve’s face, and he chuckles, a little speechlessly. “I never really pictured Tony as a kid fanatic, but he’s been pretty excited about having Peter here.”

Bucky smiles back. “Peter has that effect on people.”

“You’re telling me.”

Steve stands as well, giving Bucky a quick and very unsubtle once-over to ensure he’s okay, before patting his shoulder and saying, “Take your time, I’ll meet you out there.”

He nods, watching Steve leave before heading into the attached bathroom. The shower is unnecessarily spacious, Bucky shakes his head as soon as he sees it. Stark could fit eight people in this thing, and an intrusive and upsetting thought of whether or not he’s *tried* has Bucky jumping under the spray of water just to feel the scalding water on his skin.

The water relieves some of the pounding in his head, but Bucky doesn’t linger. He’s not necessarily *worried* about leaving Peter in Steve and Tony’s care, but at the same time, he doesn’t wholly trust anyone to value his kid’s wellbeing like he does. Besides, Peter had been worried about him, and Bucky doesn’t want him to have to worry a second longer than he already has.

Their bugout bags were only packed with a single change of fresh clothes, so Bucky gathers his dirty laundry in a pile to take care of later, after he’s collected Peter’s as well, reminding himself to ask Tony where the washing machine is when he sees him.

With that done, Bucky doesn’t waste another second before leaving the room, heading for the basement. He stops, however, when the smell of food cooking and the sound of voices speaking hits him from the other end of the house. Bucky curiously travels down the long hallway until he comes to the open living area, spotting Peter in the kitchen with Tony immediately.

Peter notices him, too, the second Bucky emerges from the hall, and his eyes widen frantically when they land on him. “Dad!”

He drops the vegetable he’d been holding and rushes over, throwing himself into Bucky’s arms as soon as he gets close enough. “Dad, oh my god, are you okay? What happened?”

“I’m okay, Pete, don’t worry. My brain just kind of shutdown on me for a little while, that's all.”

Bucky runs his hand through Peter's hair, the other returning the hug. Peter stares at him like he's trying to determine whether Bucky is fibbing or not, then slumps, the worry and exhaustion evidently clear on his face. "So nothing happened? You're okay?"

"I'm okay," Bucky says again, reassuring him. "Sorry I scared you."

Peter shakes his head and hugs him tighter, pressing the side of his face over Bucky's heartbeat before pulling back, his anxiety calmed. "I'm just glad you're okay. Are you hungry? I'm teaching Mr. Stark how to make pasta."

Bucky turns and glances at the other man, one eyebrow lifting. "He didn't know how?"

Tony peels his eyes away from the can of sauce he's inspecting to glare at him, affronted. "Actually, yes, surprisingly enough, I've gone my whole life without needing to know how to make *buttered noodles.* I'm sure I've been tragically missing out."

Bucky returns the glare, no love lost for their infuriatingly inflammatory host. "Should've let you go hungry," he mutters.

Tony eyes him, pretending not to struggle with the can opener as he tries to pry the sauce open. "Kid's the one who was hungry. I'm being a responsible adult here."

"Really? You're not even doing it right," Bucky says, before watching Tony maim the can becomes unbearable. "Okay, seriously, give me that before you saw something off."

He has to wrestle the can opener away from the man, before Tony finally relents and Peter shows him how to simmer the sauce instead, the two of them animatedly chatting about mechanical engineering, which goes right over Bucky's head within seconds. He observes them quietly as he pitches in with the pasta and the main dish they'd already started, before he can't help but notice just how many side dishes Tony is preparing.

"There's only four of us here," he says, raising an eyebrow at the man. "Why are we cooking half the fridge?"

Tony shrugs, and Bucky can tell he's lying, but he doesn't know why he would. "Since Steve and the kid burned all that energy this morning, I figured we could do a big dinner to compensate." He piles another heaping spoonful of baked veggies onto a plate and then slides it over to Peter, who starts digging in immediately. "Besides, I had no idea how long we'd be here and I bought lots of fresh produce. It'll spoil if we don't hurry and eat it. Speaking of, Fri, will you let Steve know dinner's ready?"

"Right away, Boss."

Bucky sends both the ceiling and Stark the same half-suspicious, half-amused glance. "Where is Steve, anyway?"

The man's face darkens, his lips pursing together into a scowl as he grumbles, "He's downstairs fixing my goddamn ceiling. The *one* section I didn't reinforce. He had to go and play whack-a-mole with that vibranium Frisbee of his." He continues his little tirade as he steals Peter's already-empty plate, loading it up with more pasta and chicken before sending it back, like a buffet waiter or something. "I told him he wasn't allowed to have dinner until he repaired it. This isn't a youth hostel."

"I feel kind of bad," Peter chips in, somewhat shyly. "I did tell him I'd help fix it, earlier." He glances at Bucky, like he's gauging his reaction, trying to scope out whether or not Bucky is

disappointed he went back on his promise.

“I have ladders,” Tony scoffs, probably his best attempt at being reassuring. “He’ll be fine. Besides, you needed to eat and if it were left up to me alone, this would all just be one giant brown smoothie right now.”

“It’s a good thing Dad showed me how to cook,” Peter says, sending Bucky a small smile. “I didn’t know the first thing about it when we met. I probably couldn’t even *make* a smoothie.”

Bucky smirks before he can stop himself. “First time we cooked together, he tried to boil water and forgot the water.”

“Wow,” Tony says, overtop of Peter’s embarrassed, “Daaad!” dropping his face in his hands, bright red and humiliated. Bucky and Tony both laugh, the other man adding, “Really, kid? And you were giving *me* a hard time about peeling potatoes?”

“You’re Tony Stark!” Peter protests, grinning even though he’s blushing apple-red. “You not knowing how to use a potato peeler is *way* more shocking than me forgetting to put water in a pot!”

“You didn’t know how to use a potato peeler?” Bucky asks, deciding to come to his poor kid’s rescue.

Tony shoots him another glare across the table, once more pulling Peter’s plate toward him and loading it up with food from the dishes. This time, Bucky can’t help but ask, “You haven’t even had a second serving yet. What gives?”

“He’s a growing boy,” Tony merely quips, sliding the once again full plate back to Peter. “And like I said, it’ll go to waste if we don’t eat it.”

“Steve hasn’t even had any yet,” Bucky says, and Peter goes still with his fork halfway to his mouth.

“U-uhm, I can wait,” he says, leaning back from the table slightly, his cheeks pink. Bucky regards him somewhat astonished; he knows the kid can be a bottomless pit sometimes, but Peter’s rarely eaten seconds in the year they’ve lived together.

“No, you go ahead and eat if you’re hungry, Pete,” Bucky says, motioning for him to pick his fork back up.

“Listen to your dad, kid,” Tony chimes in, and when Bucky turns and looks at him, he finds Tony watching him with a cool, calculating expression, like he’s finding Bucky’s actions particularly interesting. Bucky frowns at him, but a part of him feels inexplicably validated having heard the other man call him Peter’s dad for the first time, acknowledging it.

Once Steve comes back upstairs and joins them at the table, the rest of dinner goes much more smoothly, nothing overly awkward or uncomfortable popping up, until Peter shyly clears his throat and says, “Uhm, C—Steve?”

Steve looks up, his mouth full, offering a polite, “Hm?” in lieu of a verbal answer.

Peter’s face reddens slightly, and Bucky watches as he fights the urge to avert his gaze. “I’m, uhm, I’m sorry I yelled at you earlier. Dad says it wasn’t your fault, but I shouldn’t have acted like that

anyway. It was really rude, and you didn't deserve it at all. I'm sorry."

Surprise crosses Steve's face, before his expression softens, and he swallows the food in his mouth before smiling and gazing warmly at Peter. "Hey, thanks, kiddo. I appreciate it. I'm sorry too, for kicking you out of the room. I probably only stressed you out more."

"It's okay," Peter says, smiling back, before returning to his fifth plate of food.

Bucky goes back to eating, but doesn't miss the way Steve glances at him, the honey-soaked sweetness of the smile he sends his way. Their eyes meet when Bucky glances up, and he's momentarily struck by the—proud? Admiring?—look Steve is giving him, before the man briefly glances at Peter, and Bucky feels a surge of pride all his own at the downright *impressed* expression on Steve's face. *That's right,* Bucky internally brags, unashamedly grinning. *That's my kid, a bigger man than anyone else here.*

Peter *finally* says no to a sixth plate of food, and Bucky fleetingly worries the kid's stomach will burst or he'll be constipated for days after all those potatoes and gravy. The four of them work together to clean up, Stark bitching and griping the whole time, but willingly sticking his hands in the trash to scrape their plates clean.

With dinner done and over with, Bucky ushers Peter into the living room so the kid can collapse into a much-deserved food coma, his eyelids heavy and drooping as he curls up on the couch. "Dad? Where are you going?"

"To find a washing machine. We won't have anything to wear tomorrow if I don't clean our clothes."

Tony claps his hands together, momentarily startling them both, before he excitedly points at Bucky. "I almost completely forgot! Stay right there." And then he dashes out of the room.

Bucky and Peter look at each other, confused, but Steve simply shrugs his shoulders when Bucky glances at him questioningly. "Honestly, you get used to Tony's excessiveness," he says, taking a seat in the armchair, looking vaguely amused.

Sure enough, the man returns a few short minutes later, his hands and arms full of bags. All three of them stare at him, completely exasperated and lost, as he bends down and deposits all dozen or so bags in the middle of the room.

"Okay," he says, quickly peeking inside a few of the bags, before separating them into two piles. "These ones are yours," he says to Bucky, nudging one of the piles toward him, before turning to Peter. "And these ones are yours."

"What are they?" Peter asks, lifting himself off the couch, his tiredness apparently forgotten.

"Clothes," Tony answers, smiling, absolutely pleased with himself. "*New* clothes, in fact. Ones that will *fit* you and that weren't pulled out of a dumpster." He sends Bucky a sly look, and he resists the urge to flip him off, though he's sure the incredulous reaction he'd get would be worth it. "I chose them myself."

*Great,* Bucky thinks, opening the bags and expecting to find nothing but three-piece suits and sport coats. But to his surprise, the selections are quite modest, and while he'd never admit it, he's more than a little surprised that the other man had the rationality to buy practical things, like two bags completely dedicated to underwear and thick, high quality socks.

Bucky's bags consist mostly of jeans, undershirts and pullover sweaters, not that much different

from the stuff he usually picks up, albeit larger, definitely made to actually fit his upper body. There's even a brown leather belt in one of the bags and, to Bucky's surprise, a pair of sleek black gloves, no hole in the palm to be seen.

He stares at the stack of clothes, unable to bury his gratitude. Tony didn't have to do any of this, and while part of him is wary of the man's motives, another part of him is thankful he went to the trouble, especially for Peter's sake.

"Thank you," he says, keeping his gaze steadily locked with Tony's. The man hides his surprise well, but the fact that he looks away first and starts adjusting his cuff links gives Bucky all the proof he needs that he hadn't been expecting Bucky to thank him at all.

"You're welcome."

"Yeah, thank you, Mr. Stark!" Peter says, grinning at his own pile, holding up and inspecting each item with wide, excited eyes. "This is awesome! You really didn't need to do this."

"On the contrary," Tony says, his tone brisk and snobbish, but the smirk tugging at the corner of his lips is completely playful. "I was tired of seeing your guys' knees and toes. I assure you, this is entirely for my own benefit. Have to ensure that decency is upheld in my own home, and all that."

Steve fondly smiles and rolls his eyes, before nodding to Bucky and saying, "Are you going to try anything on?"

"Oh yes, please," Tony cuts in, sarcastic. "I have absolutely nothing better to do with my evening than watch another man try on different jeans. You read my mind, Steve."

Before Bucky can agree to it, just to antagonize Tony a little further, Peter pipes up with an excited, "Yeah!" grabbing a bright red sweater and pulling it on, then frowning when it hangs down to his thighs, the sleeves swallowing his arms completely.

"Uh, Dad, I think this was meant for *your* bag?" he half says, half asks, his face confused and a little embarrassed as he flaps his loose sleeves like wings.

"Nope, those are yours," Tony says, gesturing to the pile with a confident nod. "I got them just a little too big so you can grow into them. They'll fit before you know it."

Blushing, Peter glances down at himself, how the shirt is dangling off of him like a dress, his shoulders sagging slightly. "Uhm, Mr. Stark, that might take me a while. I don't grow very fast."

Tony smiles, looking completely confident. "Don't worry, that'll change in no time."

"You keep shoveling food into him like you were earlier, and the only growing he'll be doing is *sideways,*" Bucky says. Tony turns and gives him a look, but before he can say anything, Friday's voice filters in all around them.

"Boss, incoming call from Prince T'Challa."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, guys! If you're interested in reading more of my writing, I recently posted my first irondad oneshot as well, just make sure you read the tags.

Until next time!

# For A Moment

The room almost immediately feels colder.

Tony and Steve share a tense glance, but the only thing Bucky is focused on is the way Peter has gone still as a statue. The boy looks up at him sharply when Bucky approaches, laying his hand on his rigid shoulder, and Bucky is struck by the wideness of his eyes and the undeniable fear he finds there.

Clearing his throat, Tony slips his mask of flippancy back into place and pulls out his phone. “Put it through to my cell, Fri,” he says, pressing the device to his ear as he leaves the room. Steve turns and gives Bucky a reassuring nod, sending a quick smile Peter’s way, before he turns and follows the other man.

“It’s gonna be all right, Pete,” Bucky says, comfortingly patting his back. He knows that Tony’s AI is always listening, and that he should be careful of what he says, but right now, soothing the stifling amount of anxiety pouring off of his kid is more important to him than making sure Tony and Steve think his cooperation is unwavering. “No matter what he says, I won’t let them separate us. Even if it means going on the run again.”

Peter gives a small nod, his hands folded in his lap, his shoulders hunched. He looks so small, like this. He always looks small—especially compared to Bucky—but when he’s afraid and he curls in on himself, condensing into almost half his usual size, Bucky feels nearly sick from how strong the urge to comfort and protect him becomes. It’s dizzying, the instinct that wells up in him in moments like these. It’s a surge of anxiety unlike anything Bucky’s ever known.

He lets his hand move from the boy’s shoulder to the top of his head, where he gently musses his hair, careful not to let any of Peter’s unruly curls catch in the joints of his metal hand. Peter relaxes slightly, the barest hint of tension leaving his body as he lets his head slump against the side of Bucky’s leg. Bucky continues running his fingers through his hair, soothing him, his gaze drifting up to the window beside them, overlooking the lake, still visible in the fading light of twilight.

The sun has gone down, but it’s not dark yet, and it’s thanks to that that Bucky can easily see the shapes moving in the water, the water rippling, the waves rolling up to the dock and Tony’s manicured lawn. Bucky stares for a moment, his hand stilled, before he reaches down to Peter’s shoulder, nudging him.

“Pete,” he says, quiet, as if they could hear him. “Pete, look.”

Peter looks up at him first, confused, before he follows Bucky’s nod to turn his gaze out the window. He has to stand to see what Bucky is pointing at, and Bucky gently takes his shoulders into his hands so he doesn’t move too fast and startle them, moving both of them slowly toward the window so they can stand and watch.

“*Wow,*” Peter says, breathless, his muscles relaxing beneath Bucky’s hands, his fear and tension entirely forgotten. They can only see the heads and shoulders above the water, the tall, curved antlers on the bulls reaching high above its surface. “Those deer look really weird.”

“Those are elk,” Bucky gently says.

They watch the herd move forward in the water, finally reaching their side of the lake. Each one of them shakes their pelts dry as they step onto the land, curiously sniffing the grass and landscaped

garden of Stark's immaculate backyard. Bucky almost laughs as a doe reaches up and takes a bite out of one of the man's shrubs, misshaping it.

"They're so big," says Peter, quietly creeping forward so he can take a seat on the wide window ledge. "I didn't know elk could swim."

"I don't think Stark did either, otherwise he probably would have fenced off the lake," Bucky jokes. "And if you think those guys are big, wait till you see a moose. An average bull would be about three feet taller than her," he says as he points to the doe happily destroying Stark's garden.

"Should we stop them?"

"Nah. They're hungry from swimming across the lake. Let them eat."

The herd continues to graze on Stark's lawn, well after it's gone dark and the porch lights have automatically switched on to brighten the backyard. Bucky and Peter don't say a word, content to merely sit and observe the wildlife, the peacefulness of it, how not a single one of them makes a sound.

That is, of course, until Tony and Steve return, flicking on the lights as soon as they emerge from the hallway. "What are you guys doing sitting in the dark?" Tony gripes, and the volume of his voice mixed with the sight of him stampeding in front of the window and the sudden light pouring into the backyard startles the herd, sending them scattering away from the porch and the building and into the brush, before Tony and Steve can even see them.

It's almost too fitting for Bucky to even be annoyed at it; a peaceful moment between him and Peter thoroughly disrupted by Steve and Stark, without a second thought.

"We were admiring the garden," Bucky drawls, before Peter can come clean that they just sat and watched it get half eaten. "What did T'Challa have to say?"

Steve and Tony glance at each other, the briefest flicker of their gazes, but beside him, Peter has tensed up again into solid rock.

"We didn't get much information," says Steve regretfully, grimacing slightly at Peter's deer-in-the-headlights expression. "He just wanted us to know he was on his way. He'll be here first thing in the morning."

Bucky keeps his expression neutral, unforthcoming. He knows how, and a small part of him is grateful for that, despite the things that led to it. "Did he say why?"

Tony glances at Steve, but the man keeps his and Bucky's gazes locked, his face grim, set in that familiar, tight expression Bucky can remember him wearing it every day back in Germany. A Captain's face, Steve's always had it, since the days he was so small he made Peter look like a giant.

"No," he says, but the thing he truly wants to say rings clear in his tone. They can all guess why T'Challa would come, why he would refuse to tell them. "He just said he'd see us tomorrow."

"He's a hard guy to read," Tony adds, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "Couldn't quite pick up on his tone, but he didn't sound murderously angry, which is a good sign." His eyes sweep the three of them, acknowledging that his joke failed to lighten the mood, and adds, "There's no use standing here all night trying to speculate what he's up to. For all we know, he could be coming by to talk about the Accords or about taking his dad's UN seat. It could have nothing to do with you."

“And if it does?” Bucky asks, and before he can stop himself, he follows with, “If he comes back here convinced I’m responsible for the bombing, for killing his father, then what?”

“You *aren’t* responsible,” Steve replies firmly, opening his mouth to continue, but Tony cuts him off, interrupting him.

“If whoever framed you did a good enough job to convince T’Challa beyond all doubt, then it might be time we take this investigation into our own hands,” he says with a shrug, his tone light, but the look in his eyes when he gazes at Bucky is entirely sympathetic, with perhaps more compassion than he’s ever shown Bucky before. “And while you wait for us to complete that investigation, your accommodations might get... downgraded, somewhat.”

Before Bucky—or Steve, for that matter—can even open his mouth to respond to that, Peter bolts to his feet so quickly the curtains framing the window behind him flutter and sway. He stands in front of Bucky, staring up at Tony and Steve, his hands balled into fists, his eyes blazing.

“You can’t let him do that,” he says, and Bucky can hear the driving need in his voice, but his tone is unwavering, the fear swallowed up by all that desperate determination. “It wasn’t *him.* You can’t let him believe it is, you can’t let him take him away!”

“Peter,” Bucky says, cupping the boy’s head and pulling him back, an attempt to settle him down. “Hey, kid, take a deep breath, it’s all right. No one is taking me anywhere.”

Steve and Tony don’t look convinced, their faces twisted like they want to disagree with Bucky. He sends them a warning look, and while Tony—miraculously—holds his tongue, Steve pipes up and says, “Tony is right. There’s no use in staying up all night debating it. We’ll just have to wait and see what T’Challa says.” He looks down at Peter, but his face doesn’t change. He doesn’t bother trying to be comforting or make an attempt to placate him. It’s a familiar look, that face. It’s the face Steve makes when he wants someone to know he’s serious. “Regardless of what happens tomorrow, we’ll do everything we can to keep you two together.”

“So please don’t do anything stupid,” Tony says to Bucky, earning a listless look from Steve. “We’re on your side here, so let us handle it. I swear to God, if you make me fly over this dense-ass Montana forest looking for you, you’ll be sleeping in the tool shed.”

“Then I guess we’d better get a good night’s sleep while we can,” Bucky says, letting the barest hint of a smirk cross his face when Tony looks at him sharply, letting him believe he’s only joking. “Come on, Pete.”

Peter’s body is like granite under his hand, so rigid that Bucky isn’t sure how he’s even moving it. The kid lets himself be led out of the room, through the long, winding hallway until they reach their bedrooms.

To his surprise, the pristinely-painted white ceiling of his bedroom isn’t any more interesting after the fourth hour of being stared at.

Restless, Bucky turns onto his side, away from the window streaming moonlight into his room. All it does is illuminate that empty sofa, shining a spotlight on the fact that this is their new normal, now. He knew Peter wouldn’t end up sleeping on his couch forever, he did. And yet it’s weird to fall asleep without the sound of his sleeping bag rustling every two minutes.

Depending on how tomorrow goes, he might never hear that sound again.

Bucky sighs, pressing the full weight of his head and shoulders into his obnoxiously-fluffy pillow, attempting to flatten it into a height that doesn't give him neck trauma. *How the hell does Stark sleep like this,* he thinks, irritated that he can literally feel what a waste of money these eighty-thousand thread count sheets are. He probably could have fed himself and Peter for an entire month with the money Tony spent on this damn bedding.

He might have to fight Steve again tomorrow, if worse comes to worst. Despite what the man had said, part of him doubts he could turn on Tony and the entire kingdom of Wakanda just for him. They've spent almost a century not even knowing each other, much less actually being friends. Not to mention the fact that Bucky has a hard enough time remembering the friendship they *used* to have, without passing out in his arms like a basket-case. Steve is loyal, he's proved that, but there's no way he would risk his new life in this millennia for a ghost from a lifetime ago.

And yet, frustratingly, the idea won't leave him. Somehow, it's almost *comforting* to think of Steve coming with them, even though he'd never ask him to do such a thing. The thought of the three of them, on the run together, traveling the world until they found a small, secluded spot where they could build a peaceful life… it's soothing, almost. They could find a spot just like this, on the water somewhere. He could build them a home, maybe not as nice as this mansion, but sturdy and big enough for the three of them. Steve could help him paint it. Peter could help him lay the roof.

It would be a camping trip they'd never have to come home from. They could live off the land, spending summer and fall storing food and firewood for the winter. They could fish and hunt and grow their own vegetables. Maybe they could find a stray dog in need of a home somewhere, for Peter. It would be serene, a life without fighting, something he didn't used to dare think he could have.

Bucky closes his eyes, a small smile on his face. It won't happen. Peter would miss the city. He would feel too cooped up in a vast wilderness like this one for too long, without people, without mental stimulation. And he doubts the idea of a life like that would appeal to Steve now either, not after these last few years of being a modern man.

But the thought is nice.

His eyes snap open at the faint sound of footsteps outside his door, followed by three shy, hesitant knocks. "Dad?"

He barely has a chance to sit upright before the doorknob is turning, Peter poking his head in through the crack.

"Pete?" Bucky says, watching Peter slip into the room and silently close the door behind him. "What's wrong?"

Peter lingers near the door for a moment, fidgeting, not meeting his eyes. Even in the dark, Bucky can see that he's tired, that he's spent the last few hours tossing and turning just like he has. He looks a little embarrassed to be standing here, like he feels out of place, but more than anything he looks *terrified.*

It's not exactly a mystery as to why. After all, Bucky hasn't been able to fall asleep, either.

"Couldn't sleep, huh?" he says, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and then patting the spot next to him, gesturing for the boy to sit. "Want to talk about it?"

“Could I…” Peter starts, quietly, toying with the loose sleeve of his oversized sweater. “Could I stay here? For the night?”

Bucky’s about to open his mouth to question it, but Peter glances longingly at the untouched sofa across from the bed, seeming utterly lost. Bucky understands, then, what it is he’s really asking for.

“Sure thing, kiddo.” Turning, he piles the heavy duvet and one of the gigantic pillows into his arms —grateful, for once, that rich people sleep with enough bedding for twelve people—before carrying them to the couch. “Here, lay down.”

He hands Peter the pillow and blanket and lets him get comfortable, then steps back and climbs onto his own bed, watching with slight amusement as Peter stretches his legs and back, making himself as long as possible and finding he still has room before his feet touch the armrest.

It surprises him, seeing Peter lying there across from his bed, like he has been every morning for the last year. Part of him thought the kid would be excited, maybe even relieved, to finally have his own room, his own space. But he supposes, after everything he’s been through, maybe it’s not the weirdest or worst thing, Peter not wanting to be alone. Especially not tonight, when it feels like tomorrow could be the end of the world.

If this is the last night he gets to have with his kid, then screw it, he’ll give Peter every shred of comfort he can muster.

“I thought it would be quieter.”

“Hm?” Bucky says, pulled from this thoughts, looking over and noticing Peter has wrapped himself around his pillow, hugging it and resting his head on it. “You thought what would be quieter?”

“The forest.” Peter’s voice is slow and quiet, as if deep in thought. “Compared to Queens, I thought it would be silent. But it’s… *deafening.*”

Bucky holds still, straining his ears as if he could hear what Peter is talking about, like there’s something he’s been missing since they came here. But he hears nothing, just the gentle rustle of Peter fidgeting with the edge of his blanket, his quiet, anxious breaths.

“I’m used to a lot of noise, you know? I mean, they call it the city that never sleeps. I’m used to cars honking and people talking, and laughing and shouting, and people driving by super fast late at night with their music blaring. And at home, all our neighbors were so loud *all the time.*”

A smile crosses Bucky’s face, remembering the last time he and Peter had stayed up late like this, talking across the room, after their upstairs neighbors decided 2 A.M. was the perfect time for an impromptu guitar and drum session.

“But this place…” Peter continues, turning over onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. “It’s never quiet either, and all the sounds are so *creepy.* Like, those birds that keep howling at the moon? And all the coyotes and foxes screaming?” He turns back and fixes Bucky with a hard look, something anxious and desperate crossing his face. “And the wind! It keeps rattling my window and making all the trees creak and knock against each other. That whole forest is like an ocean, except it’s worse because it’s full of bears.”

Bucky almost fails to stop himself from laughing. Almost. “It’s definitely a big change from Queens.”

Peter sighs, burying half his face into the plush cushion, sinking into it. “Yeah,” he says, his voice small. “But at least you’re here.”

He wants to close his eyes, let sleep pull him from this long day that he's had, but he can't seem to bear letting Peter out of his sight, in that moment. It might be the last time. In the morning, this could end, getting to fall asleep watching his son lying there, safe and sound. This might be the last time he ever gets to have this, this moment of peace, if T'Challa is coming here for justice tomorrow. It might be the last time he ever sees his son fall asleep.

So he keeps his eyes open, waiting, because if it's the last time, he's going to burn it so deeply into his memory that not even Hydra can take it from him.

"Dad," Peter says, barely above a whisper. "Promise you won't let them take you away."

He lets his eyes close. It's the hardest thing, knowing what your child needs you to say but not knowing if it's the right thing to say it. He knows what his loss would mean to Peter. If T'Challa comes for his head tomorrow, he'll fight, even if it means fighting Steve and Tony, too. But he doesn't know if that's a fight he can win, and he never wants to lie to Peter again, not after Hydra.

But the way Peter is looking at him when he opens his eyes, staring at him across the room, begging him to say what he needs to hear is too much. *It will be the end of me,* Bucky thinks, lost in the desperate, hopeless well of Peter's gaze, *not being able to say no to those eyes.*

"I won't let them take me away," he says, whispering it back, knowing Peter can hear him. "We'll be out of this bear-infested forest before you know it, Pete. And even if we can't go back to Queens, we'll find some cozy, small town to hunker down in with a nice, busy street outside your bedroom window so you can get some sleep."

Peter smiles at him, a thread of brightness in the dark.

"Okay," he says, curling up against his pillow, the light pouring in from the window, illuminating the way he closes his eyes sleepily, still smiling. "Sounds good."

Bucky watches, burning it into his memory, just like he vowed. It's all he can do to stop himself from spiraling. Peter needs him, and a week ago, Bucky wouldn't have hesitated one bit to fight Steve Rogers if it meant keeping his kid safe. His fragmented, century-old memories of a man he doesn't know anymore don't mean anything to him compared to his kid.

So why is his heart pounding at the thought?

He sits up, letting his legs rest over the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees, his head hanging. It's that goddamn bruise, the one he gave Steve in the gym, when he had that *incident.* That's what this is, this anxiety, this guilt. Even though the damn thing had nearly faded by dinner, it won't leave his mind, that perfect outline of his metal hand printed on Steve's skin.

How many times has he had the exact same nightmare of leaving an identical bruise around Peter's neck?

It's not just that he doesn't want to hurt Steve. He doesn't want to hurt anyone, he's *never* wanted to. There's just something about knowing what kind of violence he's clearly still capable of that has his head spinning. He would fight for Peter. But he's so goddamn tired of it.

He stands and walks silently forward, not too concerned about accidentally waking Peter up. The kid's slept through much more than this, he knows. It's why he allows himself to gently smooth down the wayward curls sticking out every which way on top of the boy's head, why he doesn't fret about pulling the blanket up higher to cover his kid's exposed neck and shoulders. He would fight for Peter. He would die for Peter, if that's what was best for him.

But could he kill for him?

As quietly as he can, he turns and leaves the room, watching Peter's face to ensure he stays asleep as he silently shuts the door. He just needs to move around, let out the anxiety, somehow. If only they were still in Queens. Bucky sighs, missing the way he could jog through the park on nights like this, burning all his excess energy and never having to feel trapped in one room for long.

Maybe he should try the gym, see if he can burn it off that way. It seems like a good idea, but the minute he starts heading for the staircase, he thinks of those blue mats, covering the floor in the center of the room, and suddenly his stomach feels heavy. Maybe not such a good idea then, if his nerves are still shot about what happened earlier. He sighs again, changing course and heading for the kitchen, thinking maybe a warm drink will help, instead.

To his surprise, he can see a faint light at the end of the hall, and when he steps out into the room, he's surprised to see Steve there, at the island counter, sitting with his hands wrapped around a steaming cup. Steve looks up when he enters the room, surprised, his face changing from the hard, pensive expression it held moments ago. "Buck."

"Hey," he says, stepping into the kitchen and glancing at the kettle on the counter. "There any hot water left?"

"Yeah," Steve says, clearing his throat a little, before gesturing to the walk-in pantry beside the fridge. "There's tea in there, on the left. Top shelf."

"Thanks."

He pours himself a cup of tea, letting the bag steep for a couple minutes before he joins Steve at the island, taking the stool beside him. They sit comfortably for a couple minutes, enjoying their drinks, the room seeming almost black around them with only the single light dimly shining above their heads.

"Couldn't sleep, huh?" Steve says after a few minutes, taking another sip. "You worried about tomorrow?"

"No point in being worried," he replies, wondering if Steve can see through him. *Probably.* "Just trying to plan for what comes next."

Steve is quiet for a moment, then, "Can I ask where you would have gone?" his tone so light, Bucky can almost hear the caution in it. "If we hadn't found you first?"

Bucky looks at him, seeing, for the first time, an expression he doesn't recognize on Steve's face. It's alarming, being looked at like that, when he doesn't know what it means. It takes him a moment to answer, and Steve takes it as a snub, continuing with, "It's all right. I know that's not something you want us knowing." He sighs, turning back to his tea, his shoulders hunched. "You know, I'm… kind of jealous of you."

"What?" Bucky says, forgetting to be quiet from how caught off guard he is. "Why the *hell*—"

"Not necessarily of this," Steve says, gesturing around them in his usual way. "Not of this exact situation. But in general. Finding out you were living in Queens—*living,* Bucky, God. After two years of looking. I'm so grateful you were there, and not frozen in some underground base somewhere."

He smiles into his tea, but the rest of his face looks almost rife with sadness.

“You were just… living. You had an apartment. You had a *job.* You got to do things, meet people, experience things as an actual person. You got to take the subway. Probably took you not even four blocks away from where *I* would have been staying.”

“Would have been?”

Steve’s smile fades, the barest amount. “Before DC…” he says, swallowing. “I was staying in a room at Avengers tower. But then, afterwards… I went looking for you.”

“You went looking for me,” Bucky repeats, slowly, like he’s trying to process the words. “For *two years?”*

“Hydra was everywhere,” Steve says, with no small amount of contempt. “They had a hold on everything. I didn’t have a chance to catch my breath, because I thought they had you, and if I lost the trail, it meant I’d lose you, too. I didn’t stop, except when the team needed my help in Sokovia. I didn’t have time in the last two years to find what you did.”

“So you’re jealous of me because…” Bucky says, then pauses, the realization dawning on him, “… I had a home?”

The smile returns to Steve’s face, and Bucky watches, still not understanding what it means.

“Honestly, I’d say I’m more jealous of Peter.”

Bucky blinks, letting Steve see the confusion that graces his features. “Honestly, you shouldn’t be. You never would have fit on my tiny-ass sofa.”

Steve laughs, grinning at him, and for a moment, everything feels okay. His son is sleeping safe and sound down the hall, the world beyond this room is quiet and peaceful, and he’s here with Steve, hot beverage in hand, a warm light above them making the smile on his face glow.

“Peter,” Bucky says as he knocks on the door for the third time, not really as irritated as he sounds. “The hell are you doing in there, re-tiling the place? How long does it take to throw on some pants?”

“I’m trying to—wh—aaagh!”

There’s a crash from the other side of the door, Peter shouting and the sound of *something* hitting the floor. Bucky opens the door, peeking in to grant the kid some modesty, only to see him sprawled on his back on the floor with his legs dangling over a tipped-over chair. His jeans are pulled up to his hips where they hang, loosely, a belt clutched in his hands. “You okay?”

“Mr. Stark is a *liar,*” Peter whines, pushing himself up, grabbing the waistband of his jeans with both hands to keep them from falling down. “These clothes do *not* fit. And this belt doesn’t even go tight enough to keep my pants up!”

“Let me see.”

Bucky takes the belt from him, inspecting it, confirming that Peter’s right, it needs to tighten at least a couple more inches before he can actually use it. “This is an easy fix. Come on,” he says, walking out of the room, Peter following slowly behind him, still holding his pants up. They go to the kitchen, where Bucky finds a sharp, thin knife and begins puncturing a new hole in the belt

after measuring it around Peter's hips.

He's almost done by the time Tony walks in, stopping in his tracks, his face pale. "What are you doing, are you *crazy?"* he snaps, barreling forward, looking about ready to snatch it from Bucky's hands. "That's a twelve-hundred dollar belt you're mutilating!"

Bucky looks away from him to stare at the belt and the freshly-made hole he's carved into it. "You spent twelve-hundred dollars on a strip of leather and *I'm* the crazy one?"

Peter laughs, and even Bucky has to admit that the scandalized look on Tony's face is pretty funny. The man opens his mouth to respond, a biting remark on the tip of his tongue, when Friday's voice cuts in above them. "Boss, incoming message from Prince T'Challa. ETA is ten minutes."

The words die on the tip of Tony's tongue, and he clears his throat, gathering himself before replying, "Right. Call Steve up here, Fri."

Bucky turns back to Peter, handing him back his belt, struck by how deflated the kid suddenly looks, his furrowed brows, his smile now a tight frown. "Thanks, Dad," he says as he tightens the belt around his hips, his downturned gaze breaking Bucky's heart.

"So much for there being time for breakfast," Tony sighs, rummaging through the fruit bowl on the counter and pulling out an apple. "You guys should have some of this," he says, pretending he's talking to both of them, but proving he's not by grabbing a banana and tossing it over the counter in Peter's direction, who catches it without even looking.

Once Tony is satisfied with Peter having something in his belly and Steve joins them upstairs, the four of them move to the mansion's entryway to await T'Challa's arrival. Peter hears the plane approaching long before the rest of them do, and then they watch, with no small amount of amazement, as a sleek, black aircraft descends straight down on the cobblestoned driveway in front of the building. T'Challa emerges only a few moments later, briefly unrecognizable as he steps out of the plane without his Black Panther suit, still looking every bit the royalty he is.

Steve politely opens the door when he steps onto the front porch. "Your Highness," he greets, the two of them shaking hands as T'Challa enters. He and Tony exchange a small nod, the man unable to help himself from commenting, "That's a pretty sweet ride you've got there."

"My sister designed it."

"Oh? Does she take requests? I'd like one in red."

T'Challa smiles, but it drops from his face when he glances at Bucky and Peter, standing slightly off to the side, waiting. Bucky knows his own face is impassive, but Peter is a billboard of his emotions, looking completely nervous and caught between hiding behind Bucky and wanting to hide Bucky behind him.

"Perhaps before that, we should discuss the matter at hand," T'Challa offers.

"I agree," Steve says, and he leads the way to the large open-plan sitting room at the end of the hall. They sit, all except Tony, who stands behind Steve fidgeting on the balls of his feet. Bucky can't help but notice the way Peter distinctly sits between him and T'Challa.

A moment of silence passes, T'Challa watching Bucky and Peter with a keen look in his eyes, before he says, "I have investigated your whereabouts on the day of the bombing."

Peter goes rigid beside him. Bucky doesn't bother trying to hide the look on his face as he leans

forward slightly. “And?”

“Based on the evidence I have seen,” he says, holding Bucky’s gaze. “I do not think you were in Vienna.”

Peter lets out the breath he’d been holding, collapsing under the weight of his own nerves, his body slumping against Bucky’s. A helplessly relieved smile stretches across his face, like the sun breaking through a sky of dark clouds. Bucky smiles back at him, but then looks back at T’Challa, unable to help himself. “Can I ask what changed your mind?”

“There was more than enough video footage of you in Queens on that day,” T’Challa replies. “Images and videos that were much more credible than the single photo of you at the bombing.” He pauses, then, a strangely fond look gracing his features. “But the thing that truly changed my mind was your alibis.”

Bucky blinks, his brows furrowing. “Frank and Sharon?”

“Yes.”

“What did they say?”

To his surprise, T’Challa outright *grins.*

“As a warrior and prince, I am no stranger to being threatened,” he says, his head held high, even though the amusement is audible in his voice. “But I have never been treated with the level of hostility your alibis showed me when I questioned your innocence.”

Bucky can’t help it, he laughs, shaking his head at the idea of Frank blowing up at a literal *prince* for daring to insinuate Bucky was involved. Something about it feels wrong, almost, that the man could trust Bucky so much, not knowing what kind of horrible things he’s *truly* done. He wishes he could have told him everything. His heart tightens when he realizes how badly he’ll miss him.

“Yeah,” he says, swallowing the sudden lump in his throat. “Frank is, uh, not exactly the warmest guy.”

“He is very fond of you,” T’Challa replies, glancing at Peter. “Both of you.”

“So what happens now?” Steve asks, drawing T’Challa’s attention back. “What do you plan to do?”

“I intend to find out who is responsible for the bombing and why they attempted to frame Barnes for it,” T’Challa says. “I have come here to seek your help with that, Captain.”

Steve perks up. “My help?”

“You have every file related to the Winter Soldier, correct?” T’Challa asks. “The best way to find out who is behind this is to establish a motive, and a list of suspects. I have every intention of continuing to head this investigation myself…” he pauses, his back straightening. “But soon, I will need to return to Wakanda for my coronation. So I have come to ask you for the files you have pertaining to Hydra and the Winter Soldier, so that my Intelligence team can begin building a case.”

“We could help, you know,” Tony says, sounding maybe a little offended that he had to offer. “The more hands the better, right?”

“If it becomes necessary, I will let you know,” T’Challa says, not unkindly. “But I have faith my team will be able to get to the bottom of this.”

“All my files are in New York,” says Steve, grimacing slightly. “After everything that happened with Shield, I’ve been pretty stubborn about keeping all my information hidden. I’d need to come with you to provide you access to it.”

“I would appreciate it, Captain.”

“Does this mean…” Peter pipes up, snapping everyone’s attention to him. “Does this mean we can go home?”

Bucky’s sure the look on his face matches the same tight, tense one on Steve’s, and Tony’s, and T’Challa’s.

“The whole world is still searching for your dad, Pete,” Tony says. “Until the investigation is over, it’s not safe for you guys to be out in public just yet.”

“Tony’s right,” Bucky says to Peter, taking his shoulder in his hand, comfortingly. “We’d get the cops called on us in a heartbeat, kiddo. I have to lay low until we figure out who the hell’s behind this.” He swallows, his hand tightening on the small round of Peter’s shoulder. “But you—”

Peter shakes his head, instantly. “No,” he says, turning and fixing Bucky with a stern look. “If you’re staying here, then *I’m* staying here.”

Bucky smiles, hoping it hides the guilt he feels, that Peter can’t see through it. He lifts his hand and ruffles the boy’s hair, gently. “Okay.”

“If it’s all right with you, Captain,” T’Challa says, standing up. “I would prefer to move sooner rather than later.”

“Of course,” Steve says, shooting Bucky a quick look, seemingly apologetic. “The sooner we get those files, the better,” he says, standing. “If you don’t mind giving me a lift, we can go right now.”

“Oo, send me pics of what that plane looks like from the inside,” Tony says. “I’ll stay here and play babysitter while you’re gone.”

Bucky grabs one of the tiny decorative pillows off the couch and chucks it at his head.

The three of them see T’Challa and Steve to the door, bidding them safe travels and good luck. Steve puts his hand on Bucky’s shoulder as he says goodbye, and for a moment, he thinks the man is about to hug him.

“I’ll see you soon,” Steve says, awkwardly clearing his throat. “Don’t let Tony burn the place down while I’m gone.”

“Oh my God,” Tony gripes. “It was *one* tiny fire in the lab and it was *years* ago, get off my back already.”

Peter laughs, looking truly unafraid for the first time since they got that phone call last night, and Steve smiles at him and ruffles his hair, affectionately. “You’re going to have your hands full with these two, Peter.”

“Yeah. Too bad that spider didn’t give me extra limbs.”

Steve's grin widens, and he follows T'Challa out of the house, giving Bucky one last look over his shoulder before the door shuts.

It's a full twenty-four hours before Steve returns, and it's the longest and most irritating twenty-four hours of Bucky's entire life.

Immediately after he and T'Challa leave, Tony once again ushers Peter into the kitchen to try and overfeed him as much as he can.

Bucky keeps his comments to himself as he helps make (cooks) breakfast, watching Tony pile Peter's plate so full he has trouble lifting it and carrying it over to him. He holds his tongue, because if Peter is hungry enough to eat all that, the last thing he'd want to do is make him feel guilty or insecure about doing so. And if he isn't, and he does it anyway, just to placate *Mr. Stark,* well. He hopes the indigestion he'll get as a result will be lesson enough.

As they sit and eat, the conversation is quickly monopolized by techno-babble Bucky scarcely understands. All he can do is watch in awe as Tony and Peter fire off ideas so beyond his scope of understanding that it doesn't even sound like English anymore. He merely observes their excited back-and-forth until he's utterly lost, and then he lets his gaze drift to the window beside the table, overlooking the lake.

There's a duck on the shore, waddling around the edge of the water, followed closely behind by six yellow ducklings. Bucky watches the way they trail behind their mother single-mindedly, following so close behind her that when she stops, they all bump into each other like dominoes.

Peter's like that, Bucky realizes.

It becomes apparent as the day progresses. After breakfast, Peter seems reluctant to let the conversation he and Tony were having end, and he follows him down to the basement lab, trailing after him just like one of those ducklings. That's the only time Bucky sees him for the rest of the day; on Tony's heels whenever he emerges from the sanctum of the basement, the two of them still chatting so animatedly Bucky can't get a word in.

He doesn't actually get to talk to Peter until the boy comes back around lunchtime, grinning at Bucky as soon as he sees him. "Hey!"

"Hey," Bucky greets, in the middle of dicing vegetables. "What's up, Stark kick you out?"

"Yeah," Peter says, reaching over and swiping a cube of carrot, evading Bucky's hand shooing him away. "He said it's lunchtime and told me I wasn't allowed back in the lab until I ate something."

Bucky really isn't able to hold it in anymore. "What is his deal with food? The guy's obsessed. I have half a mind to tell him to mind his own business."

"I tried to tell him that I was totally fine to skip lunch, but he said I wasn't allowed to keep working until I had some."

His hand pauses around the knife he's holding, midway through cutting a head of broccoli in half. "Allowed to keep working on what?"

"Uh…" Peter stalls, pointedly not meeting Bucky's eyes. "Uhm… we're just tinkering."

“With what?”

“…Stuff?”

Sighing, Bucky decides to let it go, finding it incredibly off-putting that Peter would actually… *not* want to tell him about what he’s been up to. It’s the oddest, most unfamiliar feeling, having Peter actively *keep* something from him. It’s the very first time, and Bucky can’t help but feel like it’s Tony’s fault.

Maybe Peter’s being literal, and they aren’t actually *working* on anything, just genuinely messing around with whatever spare parts Tony has stashed around the lab. Peter deserves the benefit of the doubt, but something doesn’t feel right about it—the kid is a shit liar, he always has been. He’s never been able to keep a secret from Bucky before, and he isn’t any better at it now.

But Bucky doesn’t push it. He lets the kid have his secrets, it’s part of the way he loves him. He knows he has a tendency to be overprotective, but he respects Peter enough to let him have his privacy, as long the kid’s being safe. It’s the most space he could give him over the last year, while they shared their entire lives in one room. He’s never *had* to press Peter to tell him anything, but he also never *would have.* He trusts Peter.

Tony… less so. But Bucky keeps a careful eye on them throughout the day, waiting for any sign of anything being amiss. He hardly sees them outside the basement, but when he does, the atmosphere around them is comfortable, if a little excitable. Tony can’t seem to keep his own enthusiasm curbed once Peter’s put a new idea into his head, and the two of them feed off each other’s excitement until they rush back into the basement to bring whatever idea they’re talking about to life. Bucky listens raptly to every word they say, but he still doesn’t have the foggiest idea about what’s actually happening behind that door.

And even later on in the day, once Tony’s disappeared and he and Peter are cleaning up from dinner, doing the dishes together side-by-side, Peter’s enthusiastic rambling somehow manages to say nothing at all despite how much he’s talking.

“So we were talking about a way to make the sequence actually non-consecutive, because if we can make the program run by bypassing the automatic command prompts, then it won’t need to go over every single prompt consecutively and it won’t lag or give us that stupid error message anymore,” Peter says in one long go, without taking a breath. “Which would be awesome, because I’m trying to get it to run smoothly but every time it goes through the prompts consecutively, the sequence gets confused and it doesn’t do what I want it to do.”

“Well that…” Bucky tries, not even knowing where to begin. “That’s rough, buddy.”

Peter laughs, accidentally splashing soap suds everywhere as his shoulders shake with his laughter. He seems okay, Bucky realizes, watching his body language and his expression, listening keenly to the tone of his voice. It’s leaps and bounds above how he was last night, when he was nervous, and reserved, and scared. He seems more like himself, here, smiling, talking excitedly, so enthusiastic about what he’s saying that he forgets to breathe.

Bucky tries to take control of how he’s feeling, but it’s odd, watching Peter shower that kind of wide-eyed attention on someone else. It’s familiar, the way he’s acting, but it’s unfamiliar because it’s to *someone else.* It’s not the same as watching him interact with Ned, a peer, who is very similar to him in a lot of ways. It’s not even the same as watching him interact with Frank or his wife, or Delmar, people Peter respects and even admires, but doesn’t lavish with the same kind of attention he gives Bucky.

*And Tony, apparently.*

He spends the rest of the night watching the two of them exist in their own little world, watching Peter get to spend time with a man he's idolized for *years,* a man who saved his life once, just like Bucky had. Peter's known Tony Stark for most of his life, has been his fan and admirer long before he even knew Bucky existed. So really, he has no claim to being looked at like that. It's not something that belongs to him.

So why does he feel *cheated?*

It's an emotion he keeps to himself, until Steve comes back the next morning, taking one look at him and somehow just *knowing* that something is wrong. Bucky has no intention of telling him, but then he watches Peter excitedly follow Tony back down into the basement, that same anxious bubbliness in his step.

Steve can plainly see the displeasure on his face. The man places a friendly hand on his shoulder, giving him a small smile as he offers, "It's okay to be frustrated."

Bucky frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Buck, come on," Steve says, and the smile on his face kind of makes Bucky want to hit him. "You're watching your kid transfer his hero worship from you to another person, and you're scrambling to hang on to that worship a little longer."

"I'm not *scrambling,*" Bucky protests, but it sounds weak even to him, and he sighs, deflated. "You're right. It's just…" He looks up, gazing at the stairs, longingly. "I always knew Peter would outgrow me someday…" he says, "…I just wasn't expecting it to be this soon."

The smile on Steve's face softens to something less teasing, more affectionate, and he squeezes Bucky shoulder and starts leading him away from the stairs. "Hey, come here. I want to show you something."

Bucky glances at him, confused, but lets Steve guide him back to his own room, where he sees the boxes Steve brought back with him from New York stacked neatly off to the side. Bucky had just assumed they were files, or Steve's belongings that he wanted to hang on to while the investigation proceeds. But to his surprise, the man takes one of the smaller boxes, brings it over to him, and opens the flaps.

"Steve?" Bucky questions, gazing into the box and freezing when he sees the coffee mug on top, he recognizes it right away, *World's Best Dad* printed across it in looping cursive. That's his mug, the one Peter gave him, but he doesn't understand why Steve has it. "What—?"

"I thought you might want this stuff," Steve admits, kind of shyly. "So I pulled some strings, said the Avengers needed it for our investigation." He turns and gestures to the rest of the boxes, Bucky feels his heart skip a beat. "I managed to save it from being locked up somewhere."

He takes the box, not knowing what the hell to say. It's odd, having his and Peter's entire life together packed in boxes like this, something sort of sad about it, but he's surprised by how genuinely *relieved* he is to see it all, not realizing until this very moment how much it all meant to him.

"I…" he starts, swallowing around the edge in his voice. "Steve, this is… wow."

"I wasn't trying to snoop," Steve says, in a somewhat defensive tone. "But, uh, if you have some time, I'd love an explanation for *these.*" He grins as he pulls out one of the cheap, colorful stuffed

animals Peter won on his birthday at Coney Island.

Bucky laughs, taking the stuffie from him and setting the box down, opening it fully. “Well, if you’re sure,” he says, smiling, gesturing to the edge of Steve’s bed. “Have a seat.”

# Cabin Fever

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's amazing how a giant mansion can feel so small.

The damn thing is bigger and more spacious than the entire apartment *building* Bucky and Peter shared before, but somehow, the simple rule of not being allowed to step a foot outside has made it feel impossibly smaller, much more confined than their studio apartment ever did. Bucky manages well enough, for the most part—it's not like he's a stranger to imprisonment—but the effect it has on Peter is palpable.

Peter exhausts this place's novelty charm in just a few days. He's explored the mansion top to bottom, taking his time to get accustomed with the gym and the library and the rec room to his heart's content, but the only thing that seems to give him any reprieve from his restlessness, Bucky notices, is spending time in the lab with Tony.

He tries not to feel slighted by it, he really, really does. This is *good* for Peter, he knows it is. What could be better for a student of STEM than spending one-on-one time in a lab with one of the most brilliant scientists on Earth? More than that, what could be better for a kid than getting to learn from his own personal hero, especially when said hero is acknowledging and investing in his potential? What kind of dad would Bucky be to deny him that?

It's an opportunity that shouldn't be turned away, and more importantly, it's Peter's dream. Bucky would never want anything less for him. He *wants* Peter to get recognized for his brilliance, he *wants* him to get to spend time with his idol. And he wants him to not feel like a prisoner here, to enjoy being stuck in this place as much as he possibly can while they are. He would much rather Peter find some joy in this situation than be miserable and cooped up.

So why does he feel so irritated?

Steve teases him that he's jealous, but it's not like that. Bucky hates seeing Peter depressed and agitated, bored out of his mind and longing to go home, and those moments where Tony walks in and asks him if he wants to go down to the lab, and Peter's face lights up, like his whole day just got brighter? Bucky *loves* those moments, seeing the tension and anxiety slip away from him, leaving a glowing smile in their wake. That's the best feeling in the whole world, right there, watching his kid cheer up, seeing that joy and excitement take over him. He doesn't care if he's not the one who caused it.

It's just *odd,* watching Peter rant and rave and shower someone else with his infectious enthusiasm. It's odd watching him eagerly stick to someone else's side, staring at him with those wide, adoring eyes, like Tony hung the stars in the sky. It's odd to have Peter close by and yet feel like he's so far away, farther than he's felt since the day Bucky took him in.

There's a touch of loneliness there, Bucky knows that. But that's not the weirdest or worst part. It's odd to watch Peter shift his "hero worship," as Steve had called it, to someone else—but it's worse to see how much better Peter could thrive in someone else's care.

It's the insecurity, really, that's the worst part. It's the worst because he knows it's true—Tony is, in a lot of ways, better equipped for these responsibilities than Bucky ever was. He doesn't doubt that he loves Peter more than Stark is even capable of. But he also knows that if Stark had been the

one who had Peter, that day he got sick, he wouldn't have been even half as useless as Bucky had been.

It's the insecurity of knowing that Tony is a free man, one who can afford healthcare and clothing and an apartment that isn't the size of a shoebox. It's the insecurity of knowing that Tony can understand Peter's hobbies and interests deeper than Bucky can even pretend to, that Tony can, in every single way, give him a better future than Bucky ever could.

He knows no one can come close to loving Peter as much as he does. But what does that matter, in the long run? Loving Peter isn't going to help him get ahead in this world, especially when this world is even newer to Bucky than it is to him. The love he feels for him isn't enough. But it's the only thing Bucky has to give.

So it's awful, in a lot of ways, to watch Peter interact with someone who can give him all the things Bucky can't, things Bucky *wants* Peter to have, things Peter utterly deserves. He's always known that he's not what's best for Peter. But it's so much worse to watch it, in front of his very eyes, to have his own shortcomings shoved in his face in a way he can't ignore. It's not jealousy, despite what Steve might think. It's the unavoidable fact that if Bucky truly wanted what's best for Peter, he would let him go.

And that thought is unbearable. He's ashamed of his own selfishness, that he can admit to himself that he's not the best person to take care of Peter and yet refuse to give him up. Can he really claim to be Peter's dad if he doesn't put his needs before his own wants? Can he really claim to love Peter more than anyone else if he denies him the chance to have a better life?

"There's no reason you can't have it both ways, Buck."

Bucky turns his gaze away from his cup of coffee, glancing at Steve skeptically. "What do you mean?"

"Forgetting the money issue for a moment, what does Tony really have that you don't?" He's grateful for the serious tone in the man's voice, that Steve is genuinely trying to help him solve his problems. "Resources? Connections? He doesn't have to be Peter's dad to give him those things. From what I've seen, Tony seems pretty happy to mentor Peter anyway."

He takes a slow sip of his coffee. "Yeah, I guess so."

"And after we clear your name," Steve continues, "and your citizenship is reinstated, Tony won't have anything that you don't."

"Give or take a couple dozen billion dollars."

Steve chuckles. "Well, *yeah,* but most people aren't billionaires, and that doesn't make *them* unfit parents."

"Yeah," Bucky agrees, biting down on the urge to reply that he's pretty sure most parents aren't given that option. "You're right. I don't necessarily think Peter would be *happier* with someone else, it's just…" He glances up, stares across the open room, at the hall leading to the basement where Peter and Tony are working away. "...Doubt."

"I get it," Steve says, looking down at his own cup, resting his arms on the island counter. "It makes sense. You've been through a lot." It's small, but Bucky still sees Steve's shoulders tighten slightly. "And you took on the toughest job imaginable pretty much immediately. I think the fact that you're worrying about this at all just shows how much you love him."

“I’m happy if he’s happy,” Bucky says, admitting to it, like he’s ashamed. “Does that make me a bad parent? Being satisfied with the quaint and peaceful life we have together, instead of pushing him to want *more,* like he deserves? I know that *I’m* content to have things stay the way they were, but is it selfish of me to believe Peter when he says he is, too?”

He rests his upper body on the counter, encircling his coffee mug with his arms. Stark’s cabinets are full of high-end dishes and cutlery, but Bucky’s been washing and reusing the mug Peter gave him for days now. “I’m not blind, Steve. I *know* that Peter could do anything he wanted if he had the opportunity. And I know Stark can *give* him those opportunities. Maybe you’re right, and I don’t have to remove myself completely from the picture to let him have those things, but what does it say about me—as someone who’s supposed to be *his dad*—that I want the quiet life we had together to be enough for him?”

“You’re human, Buck. People don’t stop being *people* when they become parents. No, I don’t think you’re selfish for wanting to stay with your son.”

After almost a year of hearing people refer to Peter as his son, it isn’t odd anymore, but it *is* odd how warm he feels hearing it come from Steve.

“Peter makes me feel *inconveniently* human,” he mutters, and Steve laughs, almost spilling his coffee onto the counter. “It’s taken me a long time to even understand the concept of wanting things, you know? It’s been a long, uncomfortable battle. But I’m finally at the point where I can say that I—I *want* to be Peter’s dad. It’s… who I am, now.”

“Sometimes who we are is who we are to other people,” Steve says, softly, and in that moment, Bucky realizes that he might be the only person in the world who understands. He also woke up alone in this strange new world, and since then, his identity has probably been reduced to only who he is to other people—Captain America, the only part of him this world remembers. “But you’re more than that too, Buck. You’re also *you.*”

Bucky gives a short, mirthless laugh. “I don’t really know who that is, Steve.”

Steve’s hand leaves the handle of his coffee mug and lays over Bucky’s own, giving it a small, reassuring squeeze.

“Let me remind you.”

Another laugh startles its way out of him, genuine this time. He playfully lets his shoulder knock against Steve’s, practically already touching from how close their barstools are to each other. “Careful there, Rogers. Trying to jog my memory didn’t exactly go so well last time.”

“Yeah well, I’m stubborn,” Steve says lightly, with a small shrug and a playful grin.

“I don’t need to be reminded of *that.*”

They share a laugh, and it feels *good,* joking around with Steve. It feels natural, somehow, the way New York had felt natural. Not exactly familiar, not in any conscious way he recognizes, but something he just *does,* his body remembering how; an old, awakened muscle memory.

“When this is all over,” Steve begins, somewhat hesitantly. “Would you consider staying with—us? At Avengers Tower? With Peter, of course.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow at him. “You think Stark would be okay with that?”

“I don’t see why he wouldn’t be. It’s not like we don’t have the room.”

A small shred of doubt nags at him. “And you plan on staying there?” he asks, broaching the subject cautiously. “Even with everything going on with the Accords?”

Steve kind of looks like he wants to groan miserably, but he sends Bucky a small smile that isn’t nearly as reassuring as he thinks it is and says, “I trust that my team and I will pull through this.” He looks down at his coffee, still smiling, but there’s a weight to it now; the barest hint of tenseness in his body, Captain America putting on a show.

He considers pressing him on it, encouraging him to open up, the way Steve has for him so many times already. It’s more than thinking Steve needs a friend right now—Bucky *wants* to be there for Steve, to listen, if that will help make him feel better. It startles him a little, that realization, to learn that, despite not even remembering ever seeing it before, the sight of that sad puppy-dog look on Steve’s face can still make Bucky want to comfort him.

Just as he opens his mouth to tell him as much, both their attentions are grabbed by the soft sound of footsteps padding into the room. They lift their heads in unison to glance down the hall, just as Peter rounds the corner, grinning when he sees them.

“Stark send you up for another snack?” Bucky asks, pretending to read the clock on the wall. “What, has it been five minutes already?”

“Ha-ha,” Peter says, still grinning, but swiping an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter all the same. “Nah, he just had to take a call.”

“What are you guys working on down there?” Steve asks, as if Bucky hadn’t just spent the last two hours complaining that Peter won’t tell him.

“Uh, we’re just tinkering,” Peter replies, smiling at Steve, probably able to tell that neither of them believe him, if the way he starts rambling is anything to go by. “Just, y’know, practicing coding and theorizing and playing around with different alloys and stuff? Just—just for fun, just playing around.”

“Right,” Steve says, the tone in his voice confirming that he *definitely* doesn’t believe him. Which is good, because Peter is lying. “You guys aren’t making bombs down there or something, are you?”

“Uhh,” Peter starts, shaking his head fiercely when Steve raises an eyebrow at him. “No, of course not! Nothing like that, it’s nothing.”

“Okay. Well, at least we’ve established that there’s an *it* you don’t want to tell us about.”

Peter’s face tightens into an indignant little frown, obviously not thrilled at being caught in a lie. That’s not the expression Bucky had been expecting, or even hoping for. He thought Peter would be sheepish, maybe even a little guilty, after being called out like that. But the kid gets this stubborn look in his eyes, like this is a battle he wants to fight and refuses to back down from.

“We know you’re not making bombs, Pete,” Bucky says, drawing Peter’s attention away from his eye-battle with Steve. “And it’s all right if you don’t want me to know, as long as you’re being safe.”

*Now* the sheepish, guilty look Bucky had been expecting crosses Peter’s face, and his whole body language changes, the fight abandoned. “Oh, Dad, no—it’s not that I *don’t* want you to know, it’s just—y’know, we’re, uh—we’re being safe, I promise, we’re not making anything d—we’re not doing anything bad.”

“Okay.”

He doesn’t *want* to make his kid feel guilty, and he certainly doesn’t want to force him to do anything. He can see that Peter isn’t enjoying this anymore than he is, so he lets it go, reminding himself that this is *Peter.* He’s young, yes, and certainly naive sometimes, but he knows right from wrong. Bucky trusts him. Even if that means extending a little more trust to Stark than he’s really comfortable with.

Steve clears his throat, offering up a change in conversation as he says, “It’s a beautiful day out.”

Peter glances out the large windows surrounding them, the guilt on his face ebbing away as he takes in the bright, warm spring day, the sun glistening off the lake, not a cloud in the sky to be seen. There are herons standing in the shallow water near the shore, and above the newly-budding flowers in Stark’s backyard garden, butterflies circle in tiny flocks.

Bucky watches as Peter trails his gaze over the expanse of wildlife beyond their pretty prison windows and wishes they were here by choice. It would be so much fun, being in a place like this with Peter *willingly,* getting to show him what being in the woods is really like, watching him explore the wilderness for the first time. He can imagine what kind of excited questions the boy would have—about *everything*—and pictures them finding out the answers together, bonding over these new things in this new place.

It would be the kind of trip he could never forget, bringing Peter to a place like this. If only they could go outside. It would certainly help lessen the restlessness they’ve both been feeling, especially for Peter. It might not be as effective as returning to Queens, but he’s sure a day out in the woods at the lake would make both of them feel a lot less stir-crazy.

As if reading his mind, Steve takes that exact moment to say, “You guys wanna get some sun?”

He’s not sure who looks more surprised, but both he and Peter turn and fix Steve with uncomprehending stares. “You’d let us go outside?” Bucky asks, unmistakably confused.

“T’Challa verified your alibis,” he says. “You guys aren’t being detained, you’re being sheltered. We probably shouldn’t stay out *too* long, in case somebody thinks to check this place out, but I think it’s unreasonable to say we can’t spend some time in the backyard for a while. We’re pretty secluded here.”

“Can we?” Peter says, and the excitement in his voice and the grin on his face make Bucky worry a little that the kid’s been feeling even more cooped up than he thought. He’s definitely been spending too much time in that basement, that’s for damn sure.

“You’ll need sunscreen,” he says to Peter, nodding at the boy’s pale skin tone when he glances at him curiously. “You step into direct sunlight like that, you’ll catch fire.”

“You’re as pale as I am!” Peter laughs.

Bucky glances down at himself, the way the sunlight trailing in from the window makes his skin look white as snow. “Fair enough. We’ll *both* need sunscreen.”

Unfortunately, applying sunscreen with a metal arm is a nightmare. Bucky doesn’t even need to touch the stuff to know that he’d be able to feel it seep between the plates and casings of his finger joints, so he keeps the tube firmly in his left hand and works to apply the cream with his right, after

Peter's been thoroughly painted with it.

The kid has patches of white, unblended sunscreen still splattered across his face and arms, but that's all right. Bucky kind of doubts they'll be outside long enough for him to burn up, so he only lightly teases Peter about it as he starts rubbing the sunscreen across his own face, neck and shoulders with a lot less care.

Once they're both sufficiently protected from any risk of burning, Steve authorizes Friday to disarm the doors leading onto the deck. Peter steps through immediately, sighing happily when the sun warms his face. Bucky smiles as he watches him, following behind, staying next to Steve as the kid makes his way down the long dock protruding off the deck.

Then, Peter breaks into a run.

Bucky doesn't even have time to shout his name before the kid is *whoop*ing excitedly and jumping off the end of the dock, curling into a ball in mid-air before he hits the water.

Steve laughs, but whether it's at Peter's shenanigans or the incredulous look on his face, Bucky isn't sure. He knows something is wrong when the man's laughter abruptly stops and he eyes him, before asking, "Is your arm waterproof?"

"Don't you dare," Bucky says immediately, turning on Steve with a defensive, wide-eyed look. "I'm serious, Steve, if you even think about it—fuck!"

He breaks into a run to dodge Steve's grabbing hands, realizing a second too late that he's headed for the end of the dock, which is a dead end if he wants to avoid getting wet. Steve is hot on his heels, and Bucky can't help but laugh as he's chased, spurred on by Peter's encouraging shout of, "Run, Dad!" before he's trapped at the water's edge.

The two of them start grappling when Steve reaches him, both grinning, trying to shove the other into the water first. Bucky can tell that Steve isn't really trying—which is his loss—and manages to back him up against the edge of the dock, nearly far enough to throw him into the lake.

*That's* when Steve decides he's actually serious about not getting thrown in, and he tightens his hold on Bucky's shoulders, only to stumble backward and into the water with a surprised shout as he trips over a line of web behind his feet, sending him off-balance and flailing as he goes down.

Bucky looks over and sees Peter grinning at him from the water, his hand and wrist sticking up above the surface to reveal the line of webbing he shot from his web-shooter to one of the deck's posts, creating a line at the perfect height to trip Steve up. Bucky returns the kid's smile, grateful for his interference.

Steve is much less amused.

"I demand a rematch," he says, pushing his soaking wet bangs off his forehead. "After *someone's* learned a lesson about cheating."

Peter sinks a little deeper into the water, then full-on yelps when Steve dips below the surface, diving toward him. He scrambles away in the water, kicking his legs and laughing as he tries to dodge around Steve.

"Hey," Bucky snaps at him with fake vehemence. "Leave my kid alone."

Steve reels back and splashes an entire handful of water at him, soaking his whole front.

“Make me.”

And really, it’s a challenge he can’t refuse.

Swimming is nice, but lounging on the soft green grass in the warm sun is better, at least in Bucky’s opinion. Peter clearly doesn’t think so, choosing instead to construct himself a rope out of his webbing so he can swing into the water from the shore, dangling off a large branch from one of the overhanging trees.

Bucky and Steve lounge just far enough back that Peter can run and jump without splashing them, and Bucky’s happy that the kid is getting to run around in the fresh air. It’s no web-slinging through the city, but it’s more enjoyable than the few times he’s taken him down to the gym and made him work out to try and burn off all his excess energy. At least Peter is having *fun,* like this. And after the past few days of hardly seeing him, Bucky’s just glad to have a moment like this at all.

“Hey,” Steve says beside him, pulling Bucky from his thoughts. “Looks like your sunscreen’s washed away.”

He looks down at himself, sees the telltale streaks of oil following the tracks of the lake water still dripping off him. “Ah,” he agrees, reaching over for the tube so he can reapply it, only to have Steve snatch it up first.

“Here,” he says, shuffling behind Bucky on his knees. “Let me?”

Bucky gives him a somewhat perplexed look, but shrugs and lowers his head, letting his hair fall to expose his neck and shoulders. He expects Steve to just apply a dollop of the cream and spread it over his back neutrally, but to his surprise, Steve moves in close until his knees are practically on either side of Bucky’s hips, and his hands start working the sunscreen into his skin, not just spreading it, but massaging it in.

He can’t help the low, appreciative groan he makes when Steve’s large hands knead the muscles of his neck and shoulders, rubbing the cream in until his skin’s absorbed it. Steve’s hand drifts near the scarred flesh surrounding his docking plate, massaging a little gentler the closer he gets to his prosthetic, and Bucky hesitates to tell him that that’s the area he actually needs massaged the most.

“Mm,” he hums appreciatively as the other man’s thumb presses deliciously into his trapezius. “Is this my reward for kicking your ass in the water or something?”

Steve laughs, and the sound is a lot closer to him than Bucky expected it to be. “Nah. This is because you weren’t thorough enough the first time.” He trails his hand down Bucky’s back, to an area where the skin feels a little tender. “You’re starting to burn up down here.”

“Well, if *somebody* hadn’t decided to be a little jackass and try and throw me into a lake, I wouldn’t have had to take my shirt off in the first place.”

A grin spreads across his face at the sound of Steve laughing again. It feels good, this moment; his son playing in the great outdoors, the sun keeping them warm in the fresh, clear air, Steve’s laughter rumbling quietly around him as the tension is pushed and prodded out of his muscles. It’s a serene and welcomed peace, this little oasis from the reality of their situation.

So of course Stark fucking ruins it.

“Hello, excuse me? Steve? Are you out of your goddamn *mind?”*

They turn and look up, see Tony glaring at them over the railing on the deck, his narrowed eyebrows scarcely visible over the rim of his sunglasses. “We’re not running a summer camp here. Am I the only one who remembers that there’s a *mass-murderer* out there trying to flush the Winter Soldier out of hiding?”

He continues berating them as he climbs down the steps onto the lawn, not taking his eyes away from Steve and Bucky for an instant. “Not to mention the rest of the world, of which some people are already a little suspicious that Iron Man and Captain America *together* lost a guy *on foot,* and *might* get the bright idea to start looking into any properties we—sorry, *I* own, just to make sure there aren’t any Russian terrorist assassins being harbored behind everyone’s back? You know these people have *drones,* right? Do you know what a drone is?”

Bucky frowns up at Stark as the man looms over them and says, “I’m not Russian.”

Tony throws his hands up into the air, and Bucky can’t see it, but he think Steve might be trying to stifle a laugh. “I swear you assholes are gonna make me go blind!” He gestures upward, to the clear sky expanding over the lake in every direction. “The last thing we need is for Ross or some other government goon to put this place under surveillance and see *you two* lotioning each other up in my backyard like you’re posing for a playgirl magazine!”

“Tony,” Steve says, much more composed. “It’s been less than an hour. We’re just grabbing some fresh air.”

“If you need fresh air, open a window,” Tony snaps. “Barnes’ freedom isn’t the only thing on the line here Cap, and you know it. I’ve accepted the fact that if we get caught doing this we’ll be on the wrong side of the law, but I’m sure as *hell* not going to become a fugitive just because my eighteen-thousand square foot *mansion* started feeling a little too *small* for you.”

He tries to resist saying it, he really does, but Bucky can’t help but lift an eyebrow at the man and remark, “So you admit you *don’t* actually consider it to be a ‘quaint family cottage’ after all, huh?” which is totally worth the light cuff Steve gives him on the back of the head, as Tony makes a face like his head is about to pop and angrily roars, “Get! Back! *Inside!”*

“Well, if they didn’t know we were here before, they certainly do *now,*” Bucky mutters, standing up at his own leisurely place, his attention drawn away from Stark’s seething expression when Peter nervously pads up to them.

“Is everything okay…?”

“Yeah, Pete, everything’s fine,” he says before Steve or Stark can interject. “I guess it’s time to go back inside now, though.”

Peter’s little face falls. “Aw, really? But I just finished making my swing,” he says and gestures behind him, down to the shore, where he’s fashioned a swing out of his webs, suspended from a willow tree. “Can’t we stay out a little while longer?”

“Why don’t we go back to the lab?” Tony suggests. “I came up with some new code to try out during that boring-ass phone call and I’m excited to see what you think of it.”

“Okay!” Peter says, grinning, completely lighting up at the idea. Bucky does his best to hide the flicker of disappointment he feels, watching Stark lead his enthusiastic and rambling kid back inside, their fun, apparently one-time-only day at the lake seemingly forgotten.

Steve picks up their discarded shirts and the bottle of sunscreen as they follow the other two inside the house, giving Bucky a sympathetic look as he watches Peter and Tony disappear down into the basement once more.

“Wanna help me find some two-by-fours?” he suddenly asks him, startling Bucky somewhat.

“What?” Bucky says, raising an eyebrow at him. “What for?”

Steve gestures to the windows. “So we can board the place up. Don’t want those pesky government drones to zip by and snap a photo of us posing for our next catalogue. They’re going to have to pay a subscription fee just like everyone else.”

Bucky laughs, even though he doesn’t entirely understand what Steve is talking about. “Is he always that dramatic?”

“He’s always much *more* dramatic,” Steve replies, but there’s an unmistakable touch of fondness in his voice. “He’s animated. You get used to it.”

“I don’t know if I want to get used to it,” he says honestly, sending the hall to the basement a surly look. “But I guess I’d have to, if we ended up staying at the tower.”

He turns to let Steve see the small smile crossing his face, and watching the other man’s shock quickly change into a wide, thrilled grin makes Bucky feel like they’re still down by the shore, bathing in the sunlight.

Things slip back into the same routine of the last few days, to Bucky’s disappointment. He hardly sees Peter, except for the times Tony sends him up to grab something to eat, and while those times are fairly frequent, they’re not enough to keep Bucky from missing his kid.

But Steve sticks close by him, thankfully. It’s like he can sense whenever Bucky starts getting restless and fidgety, because he’s always right there whenever he does, offering up a distraction or a conversation, successfully taking Bucky’s mind off how far away Peter feels.

They talk about a lot of things. Steve seems slightly hesitant to talk about their past, which is understandable, so instead, he talks a lot about his team and the missions they’ve had so far together. It’s interesting how different parts of his stories make Bucky feel; at times, hearing of Steve’s reckless and outright dangerous antics makes him laugh, and other times, he mentally inserts himself into the story as Steve’s telling it, imagining what he would have done if he had been there while Steve was fighting aliens and robots and pirate smugglers with little to no concern for his physical wellbeing.

Fighting is something he’s completely tired of, so it’s odd that he doesn’t hate the idea of being there with Steve on the battlefield. There’s no joy in it, and while Bucky struggles to remember how he used to feel about things before Hydra took him, he doubts there ever was. He certainly doesn’t think he went to war for sport, and it goes without saying that none of the battles Hydra made him fight were ever done so willingly.

So he doesn’t think he *enjoys* fighting. And yet, it’s nice, imagining being on a mission with Steve. It’s a welcomed distraction after days of anguishing over his own insecurities.

Steve seems to like listening to his stories about his life back in Queens, both before and after he met Peter. There isn’t much to tell on the *before* side, but Steve does smile happily when Bucky

tells him how he acquired his scattered pieces of threadbare furniture; the time he helped the upstairs neighbors move out and they asked him if he wanted the loveseat that wouldn't fit in their truck, the time the little old lady across the street asked him to help her take her old mattress to the curb and he offered to take it. Finding a three-legged barstool beside a dumpster and fashioning a fourth and wobbly leg for it out of an old wooden closet pole.

He enjoys hearing about the quiet and domestic life Bucky's lived over the past two years, and it serves to highlight just how starkly different their lives have been since they last saw each other. Steve's stories are filled with action, stories of missions and battles, of fights for the world and the many different people who have come to be a part of his circle. Bucky's stories are more along the line of gently fond little anecdotes, peaceful and familial moments, just about as different from Steve's tales of heroism as one could get. There's nothing terribly exciting about the time Peter brought a box full of wet kittens home, but Steve seemed to love hearing about it just the same.

That's how they spend their time together, over the next few days. *Catching up,* as Steve called it, learning what the other has been through since DC, what their lives have been like. Steve doesn't come close to asking about the seventy years that took place before that, and for that, Bucky is grateful. He gets the distinct feeling that, after the last two years of desperate searching, Steve knows much more than he wants to, anyway.

It becomes a sort of routine that Bucky is just beginning to feel comfortable with when Tony walks into the room in a three-piece suit and says, "I have to go back to New York for a bit."

"What?" Steve says, as caught off guard as Bucky feels. "For what?"

"Ross called a meeting." He fixes the lapel of his jacket, fiddles with his sleeves, a nervous habit. "And I should check on things, anyway. Make people think Iron Man is still hard at work tracking the Winter Soldier down."

"Right. Good plan." Steve nods, standing up and walking over to him. "Keep in touch, we'll be here when you get back."

"Here as in *inside,* right?"

Steve makes a scene of rolling his eyes. "*Yes,* Tony, you made your point."

"Okay. Good." Tony smiles at him, then glances behind Steve and says to Bucky, "Kid's in the lab, I told him to finish up and come grab some lunch, so he should be up soon."

Bucky nods, then offers up a congenial, "Have a safe trip," which makes Tony look at him sharply, consistently surprised whenever he's shown the barest hint of politeness from him.

"Thanks," he says, trying and failing to hide the fact that he suddenly wants to run from the room. "I'll see you guys in a few days, tops."

"See you soon," Steve says, and then they watch him leave, listening as a car door slams and its tires roll over the cobblestone driveway.

Bucky thought Peter had been restless before, when they'd been cooped up for days with no end in sight. But he realizes now, with no small amount of dejection, that that was nothing compared to being cooped up without Tony around to keep him distracted.

Peter has a hard time adjusting to being locked up indoors now that he isn't constantly working on —whatever the hell he and Stark were doing down there. He still goes down to the lab, once in a while, but Peter's never enjoyed being alone for very long in all the time Bucky's known him, and even the wonders of Stark's multi-million dollar workshop aren't enough to entice him into being down there by himself for very long.

So he starts spending more time upstairs, with Bucky and Steve, but it isn't the comfortable, peaceful bonding time Bucky's used to. Peter is *bored,* and he doesn't find the same satisfaction in sitting together and chatting over coffee that Bucky and Steve do. The kid steadily grows more fidgety as the days of Stark's absence drag on, until his anxious pacing devolves into sitting in the bay window and staring at the outdoors, longingly.

Bucky's heart aches for him. Peter shouldn't be here, locked up and hiding away in the middle of nowhere. He should be at home, in Queens, at school with his friends, where he belongs, not curled up on the windowsill of a fancy prison watching the days pass by agonizingly slowly, depressed.

Steve does his best to cheer them both up, but nothing he tries proves to be anything more than a momentary distraction. Peter does his best to be accommodating, trying to keep his chin up as he lets them try and distract him, but with every day that goes by his apathy grows, like each day away from home is slowly sucking the life out of him.

"I don't know what to do, Steve," Bucky admits to him, gazing at the empty spot at the dining table that Peter left. "It's never been this bad before."

Steve regards him, attentive. "He's been like this before?"

He nods, sighing. "Yeah. Over the winter. He had given up being Spider-Man, and the weather and shorter days meant we spent a lot of time indoors. He got pretty depressed then, too." Bucky leans back in his chair, slumping in defeat. "But not like this. He was still *himself,* and he had school and his friends to help keep his head up when he wasn't at home. We went out a lot too, I think that helped. But here, it's like… it's like his brain is shutting down without stimulation or something."

"I don't think Tony really planned on using this place for long-term stays," Steve says. "There's not really a lot to do, but I'm sure if we put our heads together we can think of something to help keep him occupied."

"Like what?" Bucky asks.

"Well, what sort of things does he like?"

He thinks it over for a moment. "He likes learning new things. And he likes working with his hands, building stuff. He and his best friend used to make these giant, elaborate Lego structures all the time. He likes Star Wars and Lord of the Rings, anything science fiction or fantasy. He likes photography." Bucky mentally scans over the last year of their lives together, recounting every moment with Peter with picture-perfect clarity. "He loves animals."

Steve nods along, opening up the holographic screen of the StarkPad Tony left them and browsing through what seems to be an online catalogue of some kind. "Okay, well, good, that's a start. We can order him some stuff that'll help keep him occupied while he's here." Steve's hand swipes across the holographic screen with practiced ease, impressing Bucky somewhat. "It'll take a few hours to get this stuff delivered, but. You said he loves animals?"

"Yeah?" Bucky says, glancing at Steve's face curiously. "Why?"

“Well, if you’re feeling up to a bit of mischief,” Steve replies, “I know what we can do today.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Bucky asks, apparently taking the words right out of Peter’s mouth.

“We’ll only be gone a few hours,” Steve says assuredly, sliding his sunglasses onto his face and straightening his cap. “And we’re not going far.”

“Where *are* we going?” Peter asks, with more spirit in his voice than he’s had the last three days. Bucky can’t bring himself to protest, even though part of him feels like they’re tempting fate, here.

“It’s a surprise,” is all Steve says, turning and leading them out the door, missing the way Bucky and Peter look at each other and shrug.

They begin the lengthy walk down Tony’s excessively long driveway, and Bucky keeps his peripheral gaze on Peter the entire time, watching as the kid slowly reanimates, like every second spent outside is revitalizing him bit by bit. Peter gazes up at the canopy of trees lining the driveway on either side of them, smiling gently to himself at the sight of squirrels leaping through branches and birds gliding through the trees. The sunlight lands in fractured beams across his face, and it soothes a deep, familiar ache in Bucky’s chest, seeing Peter safe and happy like this.

Steve takes them all the way down to the main road, where they continue on foot down the dirt path beside the road, not a car to be seen. It’s quiet here, in the yuppie summer cottage district of Montana’s countryside, still too early in the spring for people to come and stay. The three of them walk in silence, peaceful and content, Peter’s gaze never staying in one place for long, looking around to take everything in.

After a long while, they finally come to another driveway arching off the main road, and Bucky recognizes the sign immediately when they stop in front of the gate. “Steve?”

Steve shoots him a quick grin and presses the intercom button beside the closed gate.

“Welcome to Pegasus Trail Rides,” a woman’s voice says through the speaker. “How may I help you?”

“Yes, hello,” Steve says politely into the mic. “I was wondering if you have any horses available this afternoon?”

Bucky’s a little stunned as the front desk attendant walks them to the stables. The ranch is huge, definitely the kind that caters to the rich summer vacationers who come here every year. The three-story barn looms over them at the mouth of the field, adjacent to the wide corral where farmhands are leading a few horses in a loop, some sort of training exercise.

Peter sticks close to him, like he’s nervous, but Bucky can see the bubbling excitement in his eyes as they enter the stables and pass by each stall. The kid gawks as she stops them in front of a stall all the way at the end of the stable, before pulling open the door.

“Holy *crap* horses are big,” Peter says, practically hiding behind Bucky as the tall, black mare steps forward, towering over all of them. She must be almost seventeen hands; her withers only a

few inches shorter than Bucky's shoulders.

"This is Andromeda," the woman says. "She's the best horse we have for beginners. She's big, but she's incredibly tame and gentle. She's also pretty cuddly."

Peter doesn't look convinced, but Bucky places a comforting hand on his shoulder and urges him forward with a soft, "Go on, Pete," until the kid swallows and lifts a nervous hand for the horse to sniff, smiling widely as she boops his hand with her nose. "Oh my god, she's so *soft.*"

Bucky gently strokes his hand down her muzzle, Andromeda seemingly utterly content to stand there and bask in their affection. "What do you think, kiddo? Think you're up for a ride?"

"Uhh," Peter says, pulling his hand back slightly. "Wait, by *myself?"*

"We can lead you around to start," Steve says, accepting the reins as the attendant walks another horse up to him, smiling up at Steve as she does. "Until you get used to being in the saddle."

"Speaking of," the woman says, "Do you boys need any help saddling up?"

"No, thank you, I think we can manage." Steve smiles politely, thanking the attendant as she finishes matching them up with their horses. Peter bursts out laughing when she introduces Bucky's horse, Britney Spurs, but neither he nor Steve understand why.

Steve and Bucky saddle up their own horses before helping Peter with his. It's exciting, teaching Peter new things and watching Steve do the same. Peter is laser-focused and attentive, and Bucky realizes that he's more lifelike than he's been in weeks, even before this whole mess started.

There's something liberating and almost therapeutic about preparing their horses for the trail ride; a kind of soothing, intimate experience as they walk them around the corral, in no rush to mount them. Steve had paid upfront for three hours, after all, and the woman said it was only about forty minutes to reach the mountaintop.

By the time he actually helps the kid up into the saddle, Peter looks happier than Bucky's seen him in months. He's seen Peter excited, sure, and he's definitely seen him laidback, but there's no comparison to the wide, brimming, full-face smile Peter has when he lifts Andromeda's reins for the first time and she begins walking forward. The kid has a look on his face like he just made a new best friend, and judging by the way the mare had been nuzzling his face before Bucky lifted him into the saddle, she seems to feel pretty much the same way.

They let Andromeda lead them on the trail, her gentle walk setting an easygoing pace for their own horses. Bucky and Steve's horses stay side by side the whole way up, and Bucky tries to spot if Steve is doing it intentionally or not, though the results are inconclusive.

Peter is focused on his posture and the positioning of his hands on the reins and his feet in the stirrups, but Bucky's amazed to see there's no tension in the line of his shoulders, no anxiety in the way he's carrying himself. He's concentrating, yes, but there's an air of contentedness in the way he's interacting with his horse, gently stroking her neck, speaking to her softly. Bucky idly wonders what it is about this that has flipped Peter's whole mood a complete 180 degrees, and then realizes that it's *everything.*

He feels it too, and doesn't doubt that Steve does, as well. There's something magical about this moment, walking their horses up a secluded forest trail, bathed in pillars of sunlight chiseling through the trees and lighting their path, the quiet clopping of hooves on the dirt below, the gentle chirping of birds in the trees above. It feels like their own little world, right here, and Bucky knows

he's using every muscle in his body to keep properly upright in Britney Spurs' saddle, but he doesn't think he's ever felt more relaxed.

When the trail comes to an end, it takes them to a long, artificially-made plateau, miles of green grass stretching out toward the cliffside. It looks like an area where the ranch lets their horses graze, but there's no one up here now except them, and Peter grins when he sees the open field and gives an echoing shout of laughter as Andromeda begins to gallop.

Bucky catches sight of the wide smile on Steve's face and turns to him, feeling a distinct and welcomed warmth spreading in his chest at the sight. Steve watches Peter gallop across the field, nothing up here but the blue sky above them and the green grass below them, like they've been transported to their own little realm, a private sliver of reality stuck between two planes.

"Thank you," he says, unintentionally startling them both. "For—for doing this. I think we needed it."

"Let's do it again," Steve replies, giving Bucky a warm smile that makes his chest feel tight in an oddly pleasant way. "Might be hard to find a spot this majestic in New York, but I think the trip would be worth it."

"Definitely."

They walk their horses down the field, watching proudly as Peter canters over the little hills, figuring out what his body language is telling Andromeda to do with the same kind of wide-eyed attentiveness he shows all new things he's excited to learn about. Bucky smiles at the peaceful, loving look on the kid's face as he and his horse grow accustomed to one another on the field, and before he knows it he and Steve reach the end and their horses stop a few short yards from the cliffside, revealing a stunning view of the lake.

Bucky gives Britney Spurs a gentle pat on the neck as he dismounts, his legs tingling slightly as he walks over to the ledge, where an old log has been tipped onto its side to form a makeshift bench. Steve joins him, and their horses begin to happily graze as they sit and survey the view, the red shine of sunlight gleaming off an eagle's feathers as it soars over the water.

"I got to ride last year, while on a mission in Moldova," Steve says. "We had to sneak into a base and needed to use horses to help us move our equipment down the trail. It was too narrow for any vehicle to drive down, and we needed to be as quiet as possible." He smiles, not looking at him, so Bucky lets himself drink in the sight unreservedly. "The whole time, all I could think about was the last time I had ridden, with you—"

"I remember," Bucky says. "The Hydra base in Austria. Gabe fell off his horse and almost got stepped on."

Steve chuckles, a fond expression on his face. "You were such a better rider than me," he says. "You guys thought I couldn't hear you laughing behind me, but I definitely could."

Bucky shrugs, grinning as he says, "Hey, wasn't our fault that shield made you look like a turtle riding a horse."

They both laugh, and Steve leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees as he says, "I kept thinking, when I find him, I'm going to take him riding again." He turns his head to look at him through a frame of gold-blond eyelashes, and Bucky swallows the lump that's suddenly taken up residence in his throat. "Even if you decide not to stay with us at the tower, I want—I want to *do things* with you, Buck. I want to have, you know—I want to have things like you and Peter have,

places you like to go, things you like to do together. I want that with you. For us."

The smile that spreads over his face doesn't surprise him at all. "Yeah. I want that too, Steve."

Steve grins, relief and affection gleaming in his eyes as he straightens his back, opening his mouth to speak, until they spot Andromeda's massive, black body trot up behind them and turn to look at her.

Peter's not looking at them, his face pointed upward as he scans the sky, as if searching for something.

"Dad?" he asks, his eyebrows drawing together. "Do you hear that?"

Bucky frowns, straining to pick up whatever Peter's talking about, watching as Steve does the same. He hears nothing at first, but steadily, a low, echoing hum rumbles from beyond the mountain, until it's loud and clear enough for them to recognize the familiar roar of Iron Man's suit in flight.

Peter's eyes go wide, his face paling as he whips around in his saddle. Bucky and Steve follow his line of sight until they see Tony fly over the tops of the trees, startling the horses as he lands a few feet away from them, Andromeda braying and backing away, shaking her head.

The only thought that crosses Bucky's mind as Tony lifts his mask and fixes them with a dark, furious glare is a colorful and resounding *fuck.*

Chapter End Notes

Shout-out to my awesome discord server for helping me name Bucky's and Peter's horses. You guys are the best and I love you.

Thank you so much for reading and for all the overwhelming love and support you've shown this story, everyone! I'm grateful for every single one of you.

# O.R.B.B.

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the wait, you guys. Please enjoy this update which has been a long time coming (in many ways), featuring a very sophisticated and detailed ms paint drawing done by yours truly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At first, the only voice Bucky can hear thundering from down the hall is Stark's. He's not exactly *trying* to eavesdrop—Steve and Tony had gone into a separate room for a reason, after all. And while that reason probably has more to do with Peter than with Bucky, he has no intention of actively breaching their privacy.

But Stark is loud.

Bucky can't hear if Steve is responding at all after they shut the door. Entire minutes pass of the man getting screamed at, Stark furiously unloading on him, and it leaves a churning feeling in the pit of Bucky's gut. He shares just as much blame in this as Steve does. He could have put his foot down and said it was a bad idea, but he didn't.

And Steve is the one getting chewed out for it.

The only thing keeping him from marching down the hall and coming to Steve's defense is Peter. The kid stays glued to his side, sitting on the end of the couch as close to where Bucky is pacing as he can get, a wary and anxious expression on his pale face. It's awful, seeing how frightened Peter is, especially after the last few hours of watching him smile and laugh, carefree and happy like he always should be. Bucky knows this is the only thing he can do to ease the boy's anxiety, so he stays.

There's no doubt in his mind that Peter can hear a lot more of the argument than he can. He catches words, phrases furiously screamed in between bouts of muffled seething, but beyond the occasional shout of "what were you thinking" and "sunglasses and hats are *not* proper disguises," he doesn't pick up on much more than the unbridled fury in Tony's voice.

Eventually, though, it's obvious the argument takes a very different turn. Bucky isn't sure exactly how it happens, but suddenly, Steve and Tony aren't fighting about them sneaking out anymore—they're fighting about the Accords. He hears shouts of "Wanda" and "Sokovia" and "Ultron" amidst the muffled, angry fighting, only now, he can clearly make out Steve's voice, too, participating just as much in the fight as Tony is, no longer allowing it to be a one-sided conversation.

He isn't relieved to realize that they're no longer fighting about their impromptu adventure, purely because the frustration and seething rage in Steve's voice is glaringly obvious now, even through all the walls separating them. He supposes it's better, in a way, than listening to him just sitting there being scolded like a misbehaving child, but it's disconcerting in ways Bucky was wholly unprepared for. Peter seems to share the sentiment, because the unnerved look on his face ebbs into a downright uncomfortable one as the two continue to fight.

“Uhm,” Peter says, standing up, fidgeting as he heads for the hallway opposite of the one leading to where Steve and Tony are screaming at each other. “Hey, uh, wait here for a sec, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow at him. “Where are you going?”

“I’m just going to get something, I’ll be right back!” Peter calls as he leaves the room, disappearing from sight. Bucky vaguely wonders if he’s headed for the basement, before Steve’s angry shout of, “Damn it, Tony, you aren’t *listening* to me,” comes thundering from the opposite hall, pulling his attention back.

Tony shouts back, most of it still muffled through all the rooms lying between Bucky and the one they’re fighting in. With a sigh and a strange, anxious feeling swelling in the pit of his stomach, Bucky sinks down onto one of the couches and lets his body hang, resting his elbows on his knees, his head bowed.

Clearly, this argument has been a long time coming. Maybe it’s not even the first time; it sort of sounds like both Steve and Tony know exactly what the other is going to say before he says it. There’s enough hostility in the tones of their voices for Bucky to think that, on some level, this was inevitable, but that does nothing to ease his anxiety or his guilt. He should have listened to his gut, instead of listening to Steve.

But that doesn’t feel right, either. They got caught, and Steve is the one paying the price for it, but does Bucky regret following him up that mountain? Does he regret getting to watch Peter ride a horse for the first time, something he’s wanted to do ever since he decided to take the kid in? Does he regret the way his son had smiled so sincerely for the first time in days, after being locked up for something he didn’t even do? Does he regret the memory the three of them made together?

Maybe it’s selfish, since he isn’t the one getting yelled at for it, but no, Bucky doesn’t regret listening to Steve at all. He needed this. *Peter* needed this. He knows Tony isn’t technically in the wrong for believing they were reckless, despite their attempts at disguising themselves, but from what he can tell, that’s not really what has the man so angry, not anymore, anyway. Them sneaking out was just the catalyst for the *real* point of contention between the two, and if the anger in Steve’s voice is anything to go by, it sounds like that contention goes both ways.

So he doesn’t regret taking Peter outside, despite the guilt he feels for sort-of-but-not-really causing a fight.

He hopes Steve feels the same way.

His head snaps up when the sound of the door being forcibly pushed open rings through the hall, and for a second, Tony and Steve’s furious shouts are startlingly clear. “You’re impossible to talk to when you’re like this,” Steve seethes, his footsteps loud and heavy as he storms down the hall, before Bucky hears another door open.

“Then you’re lucky,” Tony shouts from the room they were arguing in, not bothering to follow the other man. “Because you’re *always* impossible to talk to!”

A door slamming is the only answer Steve gives him, and after a moment, another door is slammed shut even harder, effectively ending the argument, leaving nothing but silence in its wake. Bucky waits, tense, straining to hear the slightest sound from either man, but there’s not so much as the creak of a bed now, the entire house filled with silence.

Bucky half-expected Steve to come and find him, but the fact that he didn’t makes him suspect that

he might need a moment alone, to calm down after an argument like that. It's almost surreal, to see Steve so rattled. Bucky can count on one hand all the times he remembers Steve ever getting furious enough to yell, though he honestly doesn't know if that's Hydra's doing or not. He suspects it isn't, from the bits of Steve he *can* remember clearly. More likely than not, it's just that Tony, somehow, has a way of getting under Steve's skin. Especially over this whole Accords debate.

He wants to go and check on him, but before he can even begin to stand, the quiet, much more gentle sound of a door opening down the other hallway pulls his attention away. Bucky turns his head and watches, somewhat dumbfounded, as Peter comes shambling out of the mouth of the hallway, both of his arms full with a large, old cardboard box. Bucky can't even see his face behind it as Peter carefully navigates around the living room furniture and makes his way over to him.

"Uh," Bucky says, intelligibly. "Whatcha got there, Pete?"

"It's—you'll see."

Peter sits beside him on the couch, leaving enough room between them to set the box down, after ensuring the flaps are closed to keep whatever's inside a mystery. There's a small, excited, nervous smile on the kid's face as he protectively places his hands on top of the box and says, "Okay. So."

Bucky can't help but grin at him, and he sits back, letting the tension ease out of his posture as he relaxes. Peter's obviously up to something, but Bucky has no problem waiting to find out what.

"It's… it's not really done yet," Peter starts, the shyness taking over, now. "I mean, I—I was waiting for Mr. Stark to come back so he could help me finish it. I, uhm, I wanted to paint it first. So it's kind of ugly. But I made you something."

"Made me something?"

"Yeah." Peter nods. His face goes a little red, embarrassed. "I wanted it to be perfect, but… I want you to have it now."

He doesn't really know what to say. Peter gently moves his hands, nudging the box a little closer to him, and Bucky slowly takes the flaps, grinning at the anxious way Peter is practically bouncing in his seat. He lifts each flap out of the way before peering into the large box, confusion spreading through him.

"I…" he starts, closing his mouth and knitting his brows together as he tries to understand what it is he's looking at. "Pete, it's… what is it?"

Peter smiles at him, and his voice is small and amused and heartwarmingly proud. "Pick it up."

It's metal, but Bucky gently cups it with his hands and lifts it as if it were made of glass. The only thing he can sort of classify it as is a… ball? It's like some kind of metal basketball, round and big enough to hold up between his two hands. He can't help but notice that it matches the same silver of his arm, the same kind of metal used, for some reason.

In fact, that's sort of what it looks like, now that he's really scrutinizing it. It looks like a replica of his arm squashed into a basketball. There are ridges mapping over the surface of it, outlining where the slats of metal meet each other, and as he turns it this way and that, inspecting it, he can't help but notice that it kind of looks like it has a face.

And then, to his very undignified surprise, the damn thing opens two black ports right where its eyes would be and fucking *blinks at him.*

“Jesus—”

Peter bursts into a fit of laughter, but Bucky doesn’t take his eyes off the—robot?—as it seems to scan him with its “eyes,” which he assumes are little cameras. The thing has two circular flaps that lift off the rest of its body, near the top of its “head,” that vaguely resemble dog ears as they flap and rotate, revealing a black mesh underneath, like the grill cloth used to cover speakers. *That* speculation is confirmed when the “ears” flap and an excited, high-pitched series of beeps sound from beneath them, the camera-eyes blinking at him as the speaker-ears flap excitedly.

“What the hell,” Bucky says, turning the thing over, impressed that it sounds *startled* as he holds it upside down. “It’s like a… robot-ball-dog?”

Peter laughs again, grinning as Bucky turns it the right way up and stares into its big black eyes.

“O.R.B.B.,” he corrects, looking proud and shy and excited and nervous, all at the same time. “That’s what we called him. Orbiting Responder Battle Buddy. But, uh, I’ve been calling him Orbie, for short.”

“*Battle Buddy?”* Bucky repeats, glancing between Peter’s hopeful face and the robot’s puppy-dog face incredulously. He doesn’t know which is cuter. “This thing can *battle?”*

“Oh yeah,” Peter grins. “He can do a whole bunch of stuff. He’s pretty advanced, actually. Uhm. Obviously Mr. Stark helped me program it. Well, he—he showed me what to do. I wanted to do as much as I could by myself.”

“So it, what, trips people?” Bucky asks, rolling the thing—*Orbie*—between his hands, looking for anything that could be remotely described as a weapon. Orbie lets out a whine-like beep, his ears flapping wildly like he needs them to remain balanced.

“Primarily, he’s a communication device,” Peter says, moving the box so he can slide over and honest-to-god pet the thing, like a dog. “He can make calls, send texts, emails, all that kind of stuff. Uhm, and he can link directly to my suit, the one Mr. Stark made me, so you can use him to talk to me hands-free, when I’m patrolling and stuff.”

“I guess that explains the *Responder* part.”

Peter grins. “Yeah. And he has some limited access to Friday, too. He can communicate with her, but, uh, just through binary. Oh! And check this out! Orbie, open YouTube.”

Bucky damn near startles when Orbie’s camera-eyes slide shut before his metal body rearranges in his hands. The two pieces that hold his eyes separate and reveal a black screen underneath, protected by the first layer of his body. The screen isn’t quite as large as Peter’s laptop, but Bucky’s still amazed as it emerges from Orbie’s inner shell, before lighting up, revealing a white and red webpage that Bucky can only assume is the infamous YouTube Peter and Ned are always talking about.

“It’s a computer, too?” he asks.

“Yep. He can access the internet and communication line from Mr. Stark’s satellite. No lag.”

He doesn’t know what that means, but Peter is practically brimming with pride, so he figures it must be pretty impressive. “Ned is going to have a field day when we show him.”

“I know, right?!” Peter says, laughing, his eyes lighting up. “He’s gonna be so jealous. I got to build a *robot* with *Tony Stark.*”

Bucky feels the smile spread across his face, warm, Peter practically radiating with it. Then a thought hits him, and he sets the robot down on his lap as he looks Peter in the eyes and says, "I *knew* you two weren't just tinkering down there."

The nervousness from earlier blooms across Peter's face in a heartbeat, and he lowers his head, looking ashamed. "I know. I'm sorry I lied to you." He looks him in the eyes as he says it. "I didn't want to, I just wanted it to be a surprise."

Sighing, Bucky reaches over and ruffles the kid's hair, affectionately. "It's okay. I understand. I knew you weren't up to no good, I just hated feeling like there was something you couldn't tell me."

"I hated it too," Peter says, apologetic. "I'm sorry, Dad. I won't do it again."

"You don't have to tell me *everything,*" Bucky clarifies. "I'm sure that, eventually, there'll be things you just don't want me to know, and that's okay. But I don't want you to ever feel like there's something you *can't* tell me, okay?"

"Okay," Peter says, and smiles, the nervousness gone as he leans in and wraps him in a warm hug. Bucky hugs him back, reveling in it. Somehow, it feels like it's been weeks since he held his son like this.

"You still haven't told me how this thing is supposed to battle somebody," he reminds the kid as they separate, and Peter's face lights up before he laughs, sheepishly.

"Okay, so, there might be a couple misnomers in his name, but, we were trying to make the acronym work," Peter says as he lifts Orbie up, the robot closing his "face" as he does, the screen disappearing back underneath its exterior round shell. "Place your hand over his face."

"You want me to grab him by the face?"

"Yeah, with your left hand."

Bucky frowns, feeling kind of guilty as he stares into Orbie's big, dark eyes, before lifting his hand and covering his entire face with it. Instantly, the metal plates of Orbie's shell shift, moving and sliding as his body, incredibly, disintegrates and reforms around his palm, the slats separating into smaller and smaller pieces and curling around his hand, encasing his fingers, palm and wrist, all the way up to his forearm.

He watches, astonished, as all the little pieces that make up the robot's body reconnect to cover his metal hand, like a glove, the silver color already matching to practically camouflage itself into his prosthetic. Bucky stares at his hand, amazed, confused, and more than a little impressed as he turns it over, surprised that he can still move his fingers just as easily, almost as though Orbie isn't even there.

"He's more like… a bodyguard," Peter says, like he's choosing his words carefully. "He doesn't actually *do* anything in this mode, except… protect you. That's his only primary directive. If someone's attacking you, and he senses an incoming hit but you aren't moving fast enough or in the right direction to deflect it yourself, he'll do it for you. He's bulletproof, so…" he shrugs, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Uh, this is super dorky but I was going to paint him so that he looked like one of those cool fingerless gloves while you were wearing him but, uh, I couldn't figure out how to make Mr. Stark's applicator thingy work for just the specific parts, so, he's not totally done. But I wanted you to have him now."

He can't help but grin at that, teasing and warm as he regards the kid with a fond look. "I appreciate you endeavoring to dress me up like Batman, but I think inconspicuous is probably better. He's fine just the way he is."

"Batman!" Peter says, like a lightbulb just turned on in his head. "Crap, that's what we should've done! Should have made him form in the shape of Batman's awesome finned gauntlets so you could catch ninja stars and stuff."

Laughing, Bucky shakes his head, incredibly touched and amused all at once. "What the hell do you think I'm going to be doing with my free time?" he jokes, before the question really sets in, and he asks, a little more earnestly, "Seriously, Pete. What made you decide to build me a robotic glove-ball-computer thing in the first place?"

To his surprise, Peter goes still at the question, and then shrinks in on himself, the way he always does when he's scared or anxious. He curls up until he looks small and vulnerable, like he's trying very hard not to be seen. It's awful—every time Bucky sees him like this, it's awful—but there's something particularly heartbreaking about it this time, as Peter curls up and lifts his small hand to press against Bucky's metal palm, before pulling it back, taking Orbie with it. Orbie builds himself into his original shape piece by piece, and Peter sets him in the space between their bodies on the couch and gently rolls him back and forth, watching as his ear-flaps press against his head each time his body turns upside down on the cushions.

"It was sort of Mr. Stark's idea," he says eventually, voice small and quiet. "In a way. I could tell he was trying to figure me out, you know? I think he didn't know how to feel about us and was trying to feel out how we knew each other. He was asking me all these questions, but he could tell I was feeling really anxious about—well, everything—so he asked if I wanted to build something, like a project, to distract myself from it. He said that that's what he does, and it usually works for him."

Something alarmingly close to *affection* for Stark wells up in Bucky, then, at the thought of how he had been there for Peter, to comfort him, to keep his mind off things when Peter needed him to. It's the first time he's ever felt anything more than begrudging acceptance toward the other man, and it surprises him, before the feeling fades and he takes in how agitatedly Peter is tapping his fingers against the top of Orbie's head as he rolls him back and forth.

"Okay," he says, when Peter doesn't say anything more. "So you picked a robot?"

Peter is quiet, not looking at him, just staring down at Orbie and staying silent for a long moment.

Finally, he gives a noncommittal little shrug and says, "Everyone was trying to hurt you." He pulls his knees up to his chest, rests his chin on them. Bucky feels his heart clench painfully in his chest. "Everyone. The prince of Wakanda tried to kill you. The Falcon tried to kill you. *Mr. Stark* tried to kill you. If the cops had shown up, *they* would have tried to kill you."

Orbie beeps and rocks into Peter's hand when he stops rolling him, so Peter starts it up again, gently pushing him along the seat of the couch each time Orbie rolls back over to him.

"I started feeling pretty anxious about it after that Hydra guy attacked us," Peter admits quietly, still hugging his knees with the arm that isn't playing with Orbie. "I started thinking, what if someone attacks him again while I'm not there? What if someone—what if one day I come home to—"

He hugs himself tighter, and it breaks Bucky's heart, how genuine the fear radiating off him is, evident by the stark contrast of his white knuckles against the dark blue of his jeans.

“Mr. Stark asked what would make me feel better,” he says quietly, practically a murmur. “And I told him I wanted to know that my dad is safe when I’m not around. I mean—I *know* you’re tough, and that it would take a lot to bring you down, and that the Avengers aren’t trying to hurt you anymore and everything’s gonna be okay, but—someone’s still after you, right? The guy who did this? And what if Steve missed some parts of Hydra and they come back? What if it’s not even someone you know? Someone just—just shoots at you, and your arm malfunctions, and then—and then what?”

When Orbie nudges his hand this time, he doesn’t roll him away, instead letting the tips of his fingers stroke over his smooth metal face, petting him softly.

“Mr. Stark said building something would be a good way to stop feeling so helpless about stuff all the time. So I thought, if I’m going to build something, I want to build something that can keep you safe when I can’t.”

Peter smiles, a little watery laugh escaping his throat as he continues, “We, uh, started with a wristband. Something pretty basic and simple. But I kept having ideas, and Mr. Stark kept making suggestions, and then it just grew and grew until we had Orbie.”

Orbie beeps, happily, and the fact that the damn robot ball knows its own name would be deeply unnerving if it wasn’t so cute about it.

“When we were up on the plateau, and Mr. Stark started flying towards us, for a second, I thought someone found us. I thought we were going to have to fight again, and I know that we could take on pretty much anybody, especially if Steve was helping us, but what if we’d been separated? What if you got taken away and needed my help, and Orbie was just sitting down in the basement instead of keeping you safe like he’s supposed to?”

“Peter…”

“I know it’s silly,” Peter interjects, hunching his shoulders slightly. “I know I’m being kind of irrational. But it would make me feel better if you kept him, at least until we can go home, and everything’s back to normal. Just so I know that… you’re not alone, if something happens. That you won’t get hurt.”

Bucky reaches down and lifts Orbie off the couch, turning it and placing his hand over its face, letting it finish encasing his forearm before reaching over and pulling Peter in, both arms open, inviting. “Come here.”

Peter sniffles and rests his head against Bucky’s chest, so he wraps his arms around him and holds him, the boy’s head tucked under his chin as he hugs him tightly. Peter sinks gratefully into his arms, letting Bucky take his weight, and it feels so good after days of feeling like his son was out of reach that Bucky squeezes maybe a touch too hard. He missed this. It feels unbelievably comforting to have Peter here with him again. Like nothing can hurt them now.

“Dad,” Peter mumbles, muffled from his face pressed into his chest. “I’m hungry.”

He’s grinning before he can even help it. Peter, sensing it, goes tense as a rock in his arms. “Hi hungry,” he says, loudly over the groan already spilling from the boy’s mouth. “I’m Dad.”

Bucky’s a little taken aback by just how much Orbie likes to *bounce.*

At this point, he's really starting to think that Peter and Tony looked at a basketball and thought, "Let's make a robot version of that. And give it dog ears. And the ability to shapeshift."

Orbie follows them into the kitchen on his own, rolling across the hardwood floors, his ears flat against the rest of his body so that he's as smooth as his metal ridges will allow. But when they stop at the counter and begin preparing dinner, Orbie seems to think that the floor isn't a sufficient place to watch from, and before Bucky can so much as process the mechanics of it, the goddamn thing is *bouncing* next to him.

He has to lift the plate of ingredients he's carrying above his head so Orbie doesn't smash into it and send it flying everywhere. It was amusing, at first, but now his head is starting to spin from watching it hop in place like it's being dribbled.

"Did you splice this thing with your DNA somehow?" he asks as he pours the ingredients into the pan, before spreading them out to cook evenly with his spatula. "It's excitable, it's friendly, it even has your puppy-dog eyes. What gives?"

Peter laughs, his cheeks going a little red. "Uh, I definitely wasn't trying to make him look like me. I just wanted him to look cute."

"Well, luckily for you, you did both."

The kid glares at him, but its effects are lessened somewhat by the playful grin plastered across his face and the blush covering his cheeks. Bucky grins back and reaches over, ruffling his hair with his free hand, going still when Orbie whines pitifully, and then reaching over and petting his head, too.

"I'm really glad you like him," Peter says, watching Orbie enthusiastically hop up into Bucky's hand from the floor over and over again. "I learned so much about programming. Part of me wants to keep making things, but another part of me never wants to see a line of code ever again."

"Kid, I scarcely understand how this thing makes *sound* let alone how it's programmed. You could tell me you conjured it with an ancient spell and a box of rusty bedsprings and I'd believe you."

"Basically, yeah."

They laugh, and Bucky finishes plating their dinner before they sit down to eat. Orbie follows them to the table, rolling across the tabletop and boring into their dinner plates with his big black eyes intensely, before Bucky flicks him and he retreats to the middle, finally settling down.

"What do you wanna do after dinner?" Peter asks, and Bucky pauses, for a moment, realizing that for the first time since they practically came here, Peter isn't just going to disappear into the basement once he's fed. He thinks it over, then swallows the mouthful of food he has and says, "Hey, Friday? Did that stuff Steve ordered earlier arrive yet?"

"There were packages waiting at the gate when Mr. Stark arrived home earlier today," Friday informs him. There's—somehow—a hint of disapproval in her voice. "He brought them inside when he came in. They are currently sitting in the parlor beside the foyer."

Peter raises an eyebrow at him, not quite finished the fork full of food in his mouth as he asks, "What did Steve order?"

Bucky smiles. "Finish your dinner and we'll go see." He stands and carries his plate to the sink, beginning the clean-up as Peter shovels the last bit of his dinner into his mouth. Orbie follows him,

the rhythmic *thunk-thunk-thunk* of him bouncing next to him already a familiar sound to Bucky's ears.

Once dinner is over with and the dishes are done, Bucky takes Peter to the parlor to inspect—whatever the heck Steve bought. He's a little daunted by the number of packages waiting for them, and with no small amount of fond exasperation, they begin to open them one by one.

He thought about waiting for Steve, but there hasn't been so much as a peep from him—or Stark, for that matter—since their fight earlier, and considering these things were bought with the intent to keep Peter entertained, he figures the man won't mind.

The first few boxes are filled with books and movies, dozens of them, enough to keep them busy for weeks, all of which are fantasy or sci-fi in genre, almost all of them piquing Peter's interest as soon as he sees them. "*Game of Thrones,*" he gasps, shocked and excited, holding up the boxes eagerly. "Seasons one through five! Ned's been bugging me for *months* to watch this show."

"We should," Bucky agrees, before handing Peter another box.

Peter opens it, grinning widely at the huge set of Lego inside. "This must have cost a fortune," he remarks, handling the box with the utmost care, then opening the next box only to find another set of Lego, and then a third, and then a fourth. "How much did you guys order?!"

"Don't look at me," Bucky says defensively, his own shock clear in his voice. Damn Steve, hogging all the spoiling for himself. "This was all Steve's doing."

"I don't even know how to thank him," Peter says as he continues opening boxes, finding all kinds of toys similar to the Lego; model trains and planes, a miniature village, a 5000-piece wooden ship. It might be kind of primitive, after the last several days of building an actual *robot* in the basement, but Bucky knows these are the kinds of mindless, relaxing projects Peter enjoys when he needs to just shut his brain off and work with his hands for a while, and he's more than a little impressed that Steve apparently knows it, too.

There are random items mixed in with the stuff that's obviously for Peter; board games, a deck of cards, toy water guns—bird seed? Of all things?—that they aren't entirely sure are meant for them or not, so they put them aside, continuing to unwrap games and toys and books and movies, until Bucky lifts a large and very heavy box and peeks inside, his jaw dropping. "No way."

"What?" Peter asks, lifting his head from the back of the box he's reading to gaze at him, quizzically. "What's in it?"

Bucky can only slide the box over to him limply, his mind still reeling. "See for yourself."

Warily, Peter grabs the box and eyes it, confused, before Bucky nods for him to go ahead and open it. He does so, and Bucky mentally counts down the seconds until the kid realizes what it is he's looking at and freaks out. *Three, two…*

"Oh my *god!"*

*There it is.*

"Yeah. I'm kind of pissed."

"It's a *camera!"*

"It's a dick move is what it is. Do you have any idea how long I've been wanting to get you one of

those?”

“Dad, *look!”* Peter says excitedly, completely ignoring the man’s griping, to which he can only smile. “It’s, like, a *real, professional* photography camera! Not even one of those cheap digital cameras you can buy at Walmart! You can *change* the *lenses!”* He lifts the camera out of the large box it was shipped in, his face paling as he peers underneath it. “It *came with lenses!”*

Bucky laughs, helping Peter empty the box of all the little extra things Steve ordered with it: a bag, an array of different lenses, memory cards, a tripod, a book on digital photography. Peter handles each item like they’re newborn babies, slowly and carefully, with nothing short of absolute reverence, and when they’re done laying them all out on the parlor floor, they stand over the spread and just stare at it, utterly daunted.

“I mean, it can’t be for me, right?” Peter says, practically vibrating on the balls of his feet. “There’s no way it is, right? I shouldn’t get carried away.”

“It’s definitely for you, kid,” Bucky says, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. “I told Steve you liked photography. I also told him you liked animals, so I’m just glad there wasn’t a puppy in one of these boxes.” He looks at the small pile of unopened parcels in the corner, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. “…I hope.”

“That would be the only gift that could top this. Maybe not even then. I don’t even know. I’m freaking out!”

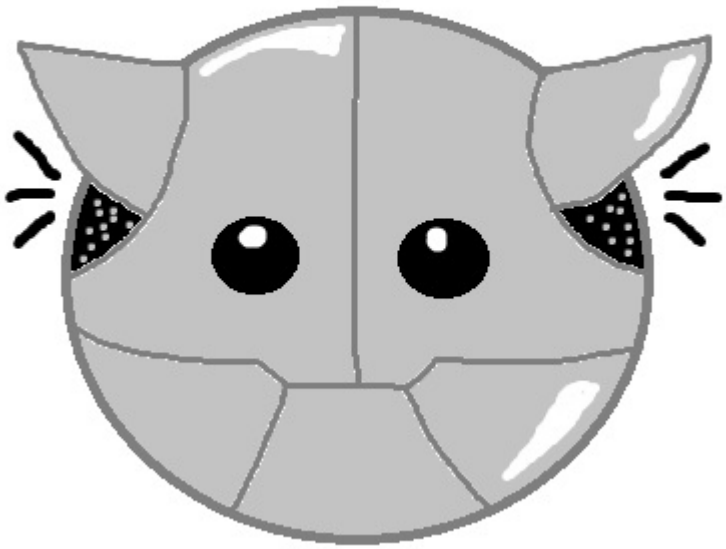
Laughing, Bucky nudges him forward, letting him finally dive into the pile of expensive photography gear and fawn over it excitedly. He sets to work on opening the rest of the boxes, and when everything is piled neatly into the three distinct piles of, “Definitely For Peter,” “Probably For Peter, But Also A Group Activity,” and “Unknown, Might Be Steve’s, Don’t Touch,” Bucky starts putting them away in the places he figures they belong—the first pile in Peter’s room, the second pile in the main living room, and the third pile (which is basically just the bird seed) Bucky leaves in the parlor, because he doesn’t know where to even begin with that.

When everything is put away and the mess they’ve made opening dozens of boxes is cleaned, they migrate into the living room to start their binge-watching session of Game of Thrones. Peter brings his camera with him, lounging against Bucky’s side as they relax on the couch, the camera resting on his lap as he plugs it into the outlet behind the couch so it can charge. Friday dims the lights around them, and Bucky can’t help but feel completely content as they sit and watch TV and cuddle, like they’re back home in New York, like nothing’s changed at all.

Chapter End Notes

Bucky: i'm a gritty and battle-hardened former assassin who doesn't have time for *affection*

Orbie:



Bucky: ...gdi peter

(Thanks for reading guys, until next time! <3)

# An Olive Branch

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's several hours (and several violent, oh-my-God-Peter-don't-look episodes of Game of Thrones) later when Steve finally emerges from his room, offering them a genuine but exhausted smile when he sees them. "Hey, you two. Watching a movie?"

"Steve!" Peter says instantly, bolting up from the couch. Orbie beeps indignantly as he's abruptly rolled off his lap.

Steve's face softens. "Hey, Pete. How's your night go—*oof!"*

Peter cuts him off mid-question by surging forward and tightly hugging his arms around the man's waist. Steve gives Bucky a surprised look, then pats the kid's shoulder, looking adorably lost.

"Steve, thank you, thank you *so much,*" Peter gushes, practically glued to him. Bucky idly wonders if he's using his sticking powers to keep them fastened together like that. "I don't even know what to say. You—you went, like, crazy overboard, and I'm really, really grateful for everything but—the *camera,* oh my god, Steve, it's so awesome and I don't even know what to say except *you're the best.*"

Realization dawns on Steve's face, and he grins at Bucky, the little shit, and finally hugs Peter back, although clearly not as hard. "You're welcome, Peter. I *did* kind of go overboard, but, if you guys are going to be stuck here—" His jaw clenches, just slightly, but Bucky doesn't miss it. "—At the very least, you deserve to have things to do while we keep you here."

Peter pulls back slightly, apparently *not* using his sticking powers. "Oh, d-does—so it's just—just for while we're here, then?"

"No, no, of course not," Steve says immediately, backpedaling. "I just meant—no, it's not just for while you're here. It's for you. Everything is for you."

"Everything?" Bucky jokingly asks from the couch, absentmindedly rolling Orbie across his lap. "Even the bird seed?"

The barest hint of pink spreads across Steve's cheeks. He clears his throat, chuckling a little, looking embarrassed. "Yeah, well, you told me he liked animals, so…" He looks down at Peter, one hand still comfortingly resting on his shoulder. "I thought, we could build some bird feeders or something, maybe set something up outside that window in your room. So you'd have something to photograph besides Tony's furniture."

Bucky can't see Peter's face, but he sees the slight twitch in his hands, warning that another hug is on its way, and sure enough, Peter bolts forward again and wraps Steve in another bruising grip, only this time, he entirely lifts the man—who's twice his height and three times his weight—clean off the floor, squeezing him and swinging side to side like a child hugging a doll. Bucky laughs outright at the surprised, incredulous look on Steve's face as he's manhandled, before Peter sets him back down, gently, unbothered by the way Steve is now slightly panting for breath.

"I'd really like that," Peter says earnestly, the grin audible in his voice. "Do you want to watch Game of Thrones with us? We're already halfway through season one, but we can catch you up if you haven't seen it."

“That’s that fantasy show we ordered, right?” Steve asks, spying the boxset on the coffee table. “What’s it about?”

“So far? Sex and violence,” says Bucky, looking over and giving his son a wry look. “Not entirely convinced it’s age-appropriate.”

An exasperated, fond smile crosses Peter’s face, even as he rolls his eyes. “Dad, come on, *everybody* watches Game of Thrones.”

“These things have ratings now, don’t they?” Steve asks as he bends and picks up the box, turning it over and glossing over the text on the back. “This says it’s eighteen-plus, Pete.”

“Oh, come on, Steve, not you too!”

“I thought it was going to be more like *Lord of the Rings.*” Steve puts one hand on his hip, and Bucky almost laughs, recognizing what can only be described as the man’s trying-and-failing-to-look-like-a-hardass face. “The only thing I’d heard about it is that it’s a fantasy show and it’s really good.”

“It *is* really good,” Peter exclaims. “And the last episode ended on a horrible cliffhanger, so *please* don’t make me wait over two years to find out what happens next!”

“Okay, okay, I give in,” Steve chuckles, placing the box set down and taking a seat in the armchair beside the couch. There’s something undoubtedly strained in his posture, Bucky notices; in the curve of his spine, the way he’s holding his head. Bucky nods to Peter before the kid can sit back down and says, “Hey, kiddo, while you’re up why don’t you head to the kitchen and grab some more snacks?”

“Oh, okay, sure,” Peter says, turning and heading for the door. Orbie beeps frantically and rolls off the couch to follow him, startling Steve in his chair as it runs over his foot in its haste to chase Peter out of the room.

“Whoa, what the—what the hell was that?” Steve says, turning in his chair to watch Orbie roll across the floor, his metal body jarringly loud on the hardwood. “What is that thing?”

“That’s the thing Peter and Stark have been working on in the lab this whole time. His name is Orbie.” Bucky tries to keep his tone light, unassuming, but he lowers it just the slightest bit as he adds, “You didn’t notice him until now.”

It’s not a question, and they both know it. It’s not like Steve to miss something like a moving, beeping robot in somebody’s lap when he enters a room, regardless of how distracting Peter’s bear-hugs might be. There’s tension in every inch of Steve’s body that Bucky doesn’t miss, especially now, when it seems Steve is no longer trying to hide it. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Steve sighs, a defeated, miserable thing. “It was bad, Buck.”

“It sounded bad.”

“I just wish he would *listen,*” Steve says, slumping against the back of the armchair. “But we just… don’t agree about this at all. I get where he’s coming from, but this whole thing is *bigger* than just us. I’m not comfortable just blindly following orders. Not anymore.”

“And what does Stark want?”

“He wants someone who can hold us accountable,” Steve admits quietly, not a drop of hostility in

his voice. “Which sounds great on paper, but what do we do when that someone decides to start serving their own agenda instead of the people we’re trying to protect?”

“Is that *all* Stark wants?” Bucky asks gently, mindful of the way Steve’s holding himself, of not salting his clearly fresh wound. “Does he only want to help people if the Avengers aren’t on the hook for it?”

“No,” Steve says, almost instantly. He shakes his head, as if Bucky had just told him the most ridiculous thing. “No, Tony’s not like that. He’d never refuse to help someone who needed it. It’s the best thing about him.”

“Okay,” Bucky nods. “And what about your team? I know you want the Avengers to stay together, but what about Stark? Do you know how he feels about it?”

“Honestly…” A somewhat sad look crosses Steve’s face, the barest hint of guilt. “I think Tony wants the team to stay together even more than I do.”

Nodding again, Bucky forces himself to relax his posture, opening his body up, in hopes of encouraging Steve to do the same. “And this guy they’ve decided should be the one to hold the Avengers accountable, what’s-his-name—Ross?—I know you hate him, but what, are he and Stark best buddies? Former business partners or something?”

Steve outright *scoffs* at that. “No. Ross is military, and Tony isn’t any more of a fan of him than I am.”

“Okay.” Bucky sits up a little straighter, waits until Steve turns to look at him. “So both of you have the same first priority: helping people who need it.”

He waits until Steve nods, then continues.

“And both of you want your team to stay together at all costs.”

Steve nods again, his eyebrows drawing together as he tries to understand where Bucky is going with this.

“Stark wants the Avengers to be held accountable when they screw up, which wouldn’t be a horrible idea, *if* there was some possible way it could be implemented without being abused down the line.”

“Yeah, and that’s the issue, because Ross is—”

“Not the right person for that,” Bucky cuts in. “He sounds like a dick and it’s a bad sign they’d even consider him for this in the first place. But the upside is, you and Stark agree about that, too.”

Sighing, Steve bows over, letting his head hang between his hunched shoulders. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“So at the end of the day, the two of you are on the same side and you want the same thing. Now you just need to sit down—when you *aren’t* both pissed off—and *talk* about how to make it happen.”

Steve looks at him, then, and Bucky lets a small, reminiscent smile cross his face. “Cheer up, pal. Fighting sucks, but you’ve fought much worse.”

A chuckle leaves Steve’s lips as they curve into a warm smile. “You’re right about that,” he says.

“You always knew how to make me feel better, but I don’t remember you ever being this good at conflict resolution.”

“I have a teenage son,” he shrugs, then shoots Steve a sly, playful grin. “Though I’ve rarely had to use it on him. Peter’s not nearly as much work as you are.”

Steve starts to laugh, but the sound fades before dying out, his expression growing pained. “Tony’s become a close friend to me these last few years, Buck. I don’t want this to tear us apart.”

It’s a stretch, but Bucky reaches over the space between the couch and the armchair and manages to rest a comforting hand on Steve’s shoulder. He squeezes reassuringly, something terribly familiar about the way the nape of Steve’s neck fits under his fingers. “Then don’t let it.”

Their gazes lock, and Bucky sees so much that he doesn’t understand in Steve’s eyes all of a sudden; affection, anxiety, humor, and beneath it all, a well of guilt. They open their mouths to speak at the same time, but before a single word can form between them, a faint *thwack-thwack-thwack* sound comes echoing down the hall, rising in volume the closer it gets.

Orbie comes bouncing out of the mouth of the hallway, hopping in excited circles around Peter as the boy stumbles in with what looks like a year’s supply of junk food piled in his arms. “I got snacks!” he says excitedly, somehow managing not to trip on the damn robot as he maneuvers his way to the couch.

He drops the stack of different snack foods on the coffee table, before collapsing on the couch beside Bucky, completely missing the exasperated look on his face as he eyes the mountain of food.

“Hungry, kiddo?” Bucky asks, watching Peter tear into a bag of chips. “I guess I should’ve made you eat more at dinner.”

The kid shrugs, swallowing his mouthful before saying, “I’m hungry all the time lately.”

It takes a great deal of effort to stomp down on the sour, petulant thought of, *And whose fault is that?* that hits Bucky just then. Part of him feels like he has no right to hold such strong feelings toward Stark. Not anymore. Not after today, and learning how Tony had helped his kid when Bucky couldn’t, and Steve, on the heels of a vicious argument, would still fret over the thought of losing their friendship. It’s possible, he reluctantly admits, that Stark isn’t deserving of his mistrust; that maybe, just maybe, he doesn’t have an ulterior motive after all.

Peter takes Orbie into his arms and reclines against Bucky’s side again, curling against him without a shred of hesitation, like he belongs there.

Bucky smiles. Yeah, it’s possible. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time he was wrong about that.

It’s the middle of the night when Bucky is woken by the sound of quiet, distressed beeping.

His head feels uncooperatively heavy as he lifts it off his pillow to glare at the door, where Orbie is sitting, whining at it like a dog needing to go out. Bucky pushes himself up and whispers, gruffly, “What’s the matter with you?”

Orbie rotates to face him, its ears flapping anxiously. With a sigh and an unimpressed shake of his head, Bucky slides out of bed and opens the door, letting the robot hastily roll out of the room.

He has half a mind to just shut the door and lock it out as revenge for interrupting his sleep. But curiosity gets the better of him, and he follows it down the hall, into the main living room.

The first thought he has when he gets there is, *I haven't had nearly enough sleep for this shit.*

"Stark," he says, startling the man until he nearly falls. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Jesus fuck," Tony hisses, swiveling around on his ladder to stare down at Bucky. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

Bucky pointedly ignores him and glances at the clock on the wall. "Care to explain why you're ripping apart the ceiling at four in the morning?"

Tony's scowl deepens. "It's my ceiling. I can rip it apart whenever I want."

Bucky glares at him, eyeing the absolute mess he's made of the living room. Orbie beeps happily and makes circles around the legs of the ladder, as if looking for a way to climb it and help, and scarcely misses being flattened by another strip of haphazardly-cut drywall as Tony drops it without a care.

There are more electrical wires hidden in the cavity of the ceiling than he would expect, but it makes sense when he thinks about it. After all, Tony's AI controls a vast portion of the structure. They've practically been living inside a giant computer this whole time. It's somewhat unnerving to see that the inside of the walls all around them look more like Peter's robotics homework than the planks of wood and insulation Bucky expected to see, but even in his tentative dislike of Stark, he doesn't believe he'd ever be so careless as to trap them all in an inevitable electrical fire.

On purpose, anyway.

He watches Stark precariously balance on his tiptoes as he reaches into the exposed hole in the ceiling, working away diligently at what Bucky can only assume is the motherboard that houses his AI. Tony wobbles a few times as he tries to maintain balance on top of the ladder while also working with his hands, and to Bucky's surprise, the sight of the man almost falling and breaking his neck doesn't bring him any satisfaction. He sighs. "Do you need a hand?"

"Almost done," Tony says back, although it kind of sounds like he's replying on autopilot, too immersed in what he's doing. "Just gotta get this baby into place."

"Uh huh. And what about putting the ceiling back together?"

"Thinking of installing an access panel. Don't want to have to re-drywall the entire ceiling every time I upgrade Friday's hardware."

"Probably a good idea." Bucky pauses, debates for a moment if he's too tired for this conversation, then presses on, "Is there any particular reason you're doing this in the middle of the night?"

He expects a jab, maybe even a chunk of ceiling dropped on his head, but what he *doesn't* expect is Tony's lips pressing together into a hard line and his face darkening like he's holding something back. He wasn't expecting it, but that isn't what shocks him. What shocks him is the irrefutably *hurt* look in Tony's eyes, which Bucky can see even though Tony isn't even looking at him.

"You're doing it now so you can avoid Steve," he realizes.

"I'm not avoiding *anyone,*" Tony snaps, working his hands a little harder, a little more diligently, now. "I just couldn't sleep, is that all right with you? Can't a man do some late-night home repairs

in his own house without a full-on investigation? Can I see your warrant, officer?"

"You're deflecting," Bucky says, though he's not really sure why he's bothering to engage with the other man at all. He clearly doesn't want him prying. And it's not like he cares whether or not Stark is all right.

Bucky wilts under the guilt that thought hits him with.

"I'm pretty sure this is the opposite of *repairs,*" he adds, and the guilt recedes ever so slightly when the edge of Tony's lips just barely quirks upward. "Typically that involves putting things back together, Stark."

"Thank God Hydra replaced your memories with such useful information," Tony says, but there's such a lack of bite in his words, Bucky isn't even tempted to tip the ladder on him. "And this is an upgrade that couldn't wait, so it counts."

"Well, I'll leave you to it then," Bucky says and turns to leave, resigned to never figuring out just what the hell the man is up to. But he feels an itch at the back of his neck, and he turns around, stares at Stark's back, facing away from him on the ladder, at Orbie still circling him on the ground. Something about walking away right now feels wrong, though Bucky doesn't know why.

"Steve doesn't want to fight with you, you know."

Tony's hands go still inside the ceiling cavity. He doesn't turn around.

Bucky continues.

"He was pretty shaken up, earlier, when he finally came out of his room. I can't remember ever seeing him like that." He takes a few steps forward, back toward the ladder, searching Tony's body language for any hint of anger, a sign to stop talking. None comes. "I'm not saying he's right and you're wrong. Until I got roped into this, I couldn't care less about this debate. I've got no horse in this race." *Except for what it could mean for Peter. Except for what it means to Steve. Except for what* you *mean to Steve.* "But from what he tells me, about how he feels about these Accords and about *you,* I think this thing is only going to tear you two apart if you let it."

Tony does turn around, then, and waves the screwdriver in his hand at Bucky wildly. "I know that. Why the hell do you think I'm doing this?"

"You haven't even told me *what* you're doing, let alone why."

The man grumbles and turns back to his hole, cursing under his breath, which he probably doesn't realize Bucky can plainly hear. "I'm apologizing," he says, petulantly, like a child forced by his mother. "Unlike Steve, I can admit when I'm wrong. And when he's right. And he *isn't* right about the Accords." His hands move a little more angrily, now. Bucky can see his jaw tense from here. "But he was right, about keeping you guys indoors like that. So I'm fixing it."

"Fixing… what?" Bucky asks, a little dumbly, leaning over to peer into the ceiling cavity, at the assembly of parts Tony's deftly fastening together, attaching each one to hundreds and hundreds of wires that span in every direction of the ceiling. "What, are you converting the house into a mobile or something? Mansion on wheels?"

Tony huffs, almost a laugh. "You've been spending too much time with that kid."

"I spent an entire year in one room with that kid."

“Yeah, well.” The last piece of circuitry is secured in place, and then Stark leans back slightly, glancing over his work. “Now you have several rooms *and* a yard.”

He can hear how dumbfounded he sounds in his own voice. “What?”

Descending the ladder, Tony gives him an utterly false and entirely smarmy grin, an expression that somehow only accentuates how exhausted he looks. “I told you. Steve was right about keeping you guys indoors. The last thing we need is you two going all *Attica* on us.” He starts tapping on the cuff around his wrist, pulling up a holographic screen. “So, I designed a radar. It should, in theory, alert Friday—and, by extension, Orbie—if there’s someone nearby. Any kind of vehicle or drone gets too close, and you’ll know to head inside before they get within sight.”

“That’s…” Bucky says, numbly. He’s a little speechless. “That’s incredible.”

Tony waves a hand at him, dismissively. “Look. It’s not foolproof. It’s not a perfect solution to the problem that you might get spotted if you leave this house. You have to do your part to stay vigilant and out of sight, capisce? If someone decides to swim across the lake and they don’t happen to have any kind of communication device or wireless-emitting electronics on them, Friday won’t know. The radar doesn’t spot organic life without some kind of signal, otherwise we’d get bombarded with alerts every time a pack of mules decides to munch on my hydrangeas.”

“Those were elk.”

“Thanks, Steve Irwin.” Tony rolls his eyes. “*Regardless* of what subspecies of mammal decides to crawl out of that lake, you need to be prepared that it could be some government scuba spy here to bring you in. For the record, I don’t think that’s likely. Ross doesn’t seem suspicious that we have you, and even if he decides to check, he’ll have to scope out a lot of other Stark-owned properties before this one even shows up on his list. That’s the only reason I’m allowing this.”

“Thank you, Tony.”

Tony looks up from his holographic screen, eyebrows raised in surprise. “I—what?”

“Thank you?” Bucky says again, confused by the disbelieving look on Stark’s face. “I know you did this to make things right with Steve, but it means a lot. It will mean a lot to Peter. So thank you.”

“Uh…” Stark uncomfortably clears his throat, averting his gaze. “Yeah, sure, you’re welcome. Great.”

Bucky can’t help but ask, “What were you expecting me to say?”

“I don’t know? Something along the lines of *what took you so long,* or *why didn’t you do this earlier,* maybe? Honestly, I was sort of expecting you to just glare and brood at me before walking away.” He gives him a small shrug, probably intending to look noncommittal, but every line of his body is tight with tension. “I just—sometimes I’m not the most *sensitive* person to things like this. At least that’s what people tell me. I can spend entire weeks locked in my workshop without even knowing it, so I thought a few days in a place this big would be a piece of cake.” A grimace twists across his face, like he bit into something particularly sour. “But, as Steve pointed out, not everybody has my flair for half-a-month-long dissociative episodes.”

“Despite the nature of his superpowers, Peter’s not used to feeling stuck,” Bucky says, grinning at the unimpressed look Tony gives him, before schooling his features. “I think being out of the city has been really hard on him.”

“Steve said the same thing.” Stark averts his gaze again, pretends to fiddle with the holographic screen. “He said you both needed the field trip he took you on earlier.”

“We did,” Bucky agrees. “Peter did. He was happier than he’s been in months. And he loved the horses. Kid’s a natural. He and his horse bonded right away, you should have seen them. You’d think they’d known each other their entire lives.”

Tony looks back up at him then, regards him, closely. There’s something calculating in his eyes, but in a soft, almost fond way. It’s alarming, the warmth and intensity of that gaze. Tony Stark is the last person Bucky ever thought would look at him like that.

“You sound different,” he says, as if politely informing him, “when you talk about him. Did you know that?”

A little laugh startles its way out of Bucky. “You’re actually not the first person to tell me that. Frank—my boss at the dealership—used to say the only time I didn’t look so fucking miserable was when I was talking about Peter.”

“It’s true.” Tony grins at him, playfully. “He’s got you to a T, Barnes.”

Then the smile falls of Stark’s face, crumbling, like a thought’s hit him and interrupted whatever supports were holding up his grin. He blinks at Bucky for a moment, some heavy sort of realization washing over his features. “Steve does the same thing.”

“What?” Bucky asks, arching an eyebrow at him. “What, get me to a T?”

“No. Well—probably? That’s not what I meant.” Tony looks at him like it’s the first time he’s ever seen him. “I meant, he sounds different, when he’s talking about you. And it’s the only time *he* doesn’t sound so fucking miserable, either.”

His face suddenly feels incredibly hot. Bucky frowns, and then Stark gives him this odd, disbelieving *look,* and his face gets even hotter, the heat travelling all the way down his neck. Stark looks as uncomfortable as Bucky feels, and they both look away from each other, wordlessly.

“Okaaay,” Tony says, clearing his throat again. “Well, on that incredibly weird note, I’m gonna just head down to the workshop and weld together a nice door to cover that crater in the ceiling. You have yourself a good night.” The words come out in a rush, like he can’t get away from Bucky fast enough, and then he turns and bolts for a hallway that Bucky’s pretty sure doesn’t lead to the basement.

Orbie doesn’t roll after him, instead head-butting into Bucky’s ankle and beeping at him, curiously. Bucky waits a moment for the heat to leave his face and the odd, squirming feeling in his stomach to go away before he looks down at his little bot. “Don’t ask me. I have no idea what that was about.”

The long, giggly beep Orbie gives him in response doesn’t offer any answers.

Bucky’s just turning the stove on to begin cooking breakfast when Steve comes around the corner and fixes him with a glowing smile, hair and shirt slightly damp from a recent shower, by the looks of it. “Morning, Buck. Sleep well?”

“Would have,” Bucky replies, tearing his gaze away from the water dripping down the side of

Steve's neck and instead focusing on assembling a suitable meal together. "If a certain moody, hyperactive kid hadn't woken me up halfway through it."

Steve's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "Is Peter okay?"

"Yeah." They share an even, sideways glance. "Wrong kid."

"Oh."

Steve runs his fingers through damp hair, dark and thick like fresh honey instead of its usual sunshine gold. "Is—is he okay?"

"He's better than the living room ceiling." Bucky shrugs. "I don't really know him well enough to say."

"What happened to the living room ceiling?"

"He installed a radar inside his AI's hardware." Bucky smiles at him. "Our house arrest has been upgraded to house-and-yard arrest."

Steve returns his smile, not looking surprised in the least. "Well, it's—" He clears his throat, the smile refusing to fall, even as he struggles to maintain his composure. "It puts an end to one argument, anyway."

"For now," Bucky says.

"Yeah. For now."

He's acutely aware of Steve's gaze on him, like warm light streaming in through the windows and covering his body. It's the same natural, all-encompassing feeling of standing beneath the sun; it's familiar, having Steve's eyes on him like this. There's nothing unnerving about being regarded in such an intimate way, and that surprises him, but it's *Steve,* so it also doesn't. Steve moves slowly as he steps closer, the warmth of his gaze steadily growing, until even the back of Bucky's neck feels hot. "You tied your hair up."

"Yeah. Easier to cook when it's out of the way."

"Can I give you a hand?"

Bucky can't hide the humor in his voice. "You get any better at it over these last seventy years?"

"No. Not even a little bit."

"Then I think I'm good."

They share a grin, and Steve reclines against the counter and quietly watches him, a companionable silence falling between them as he does. Bucky enjoys the moment while it lasts, but as he finishes cooking, the time comes to break it, and he turns to Steve and reluctantly says, "Go tell Stark breakfast's ready."

The smile slips off Steve's face. "Me?"

"Yes, you." Bucky gives him a playful smirk. "I get to wake up the *other* kid."

"Tony might take offense to you calling him a kid."

Bucky scoffs. “He was born, when, 1960-something?”

“Uh.” Steve thinks for a moment. “1970. *Wow,* God, that makes me feel old.”

“Tell me about it. Peter was born in 2001.”

“Please stop talking. I can feel my body turning to dust as we speak.”

Bucky laughs, and he and Steve share another grin as the man leaves the kitchen, headed for Stark’s room. Bucky takes a second to finish plating up the rest of the food before wiping his hands, but before he can make his way to Peter’s room, Orbie comes barreling out of the hallway like he’s trying to wear a hole in the floor, and Peter follows slowly behind him, knees bent and hunched over.

“Dad,” he whines, taking each step like it’s agony to move. “Help.”

There’s only a brief second of concern before Bucky sees the peculiar way Peter’s legs are bent, his knees miles apart, and realization hits him, the laughter erupting from his mouth without him meaning for it to.

“It’s not *funny,*” Peter says indignantly, hands hovering beside his legs like they’re desperate to massage his sore thighs. “This *kills!”*

“I told you your legs would hurt after horseback riding,” Bucky says, albeit sympathetically. “Be grateful you have a healing factor and will probably only be sore for a few hours. We used to ache for *days* afterwards.”

Peter groans dramatically and limps over to the table, where he collapses into his chair, sending Bucky a smile even through the obvious pain he’s in. “Was totally worth it.”

“I think so too,” Bucky says, and he places a full plate in front of the boy and pats him on the back. “You go ahead and start eating.”

Peter eyes the other plates on the counter. “What about Steve and Mr. Stark?”

Bucky turns toward the hallway Steve went down, listening closely for any sound or sign of either of them. He doesn’t hear anything, but for all he knows, Stark might have fallen asleep in the basement—if he even went to bed at all. “Don’t worry about them,” he says, and gives his son a reassuring smile. “They might be a while. Now dig in, because I have a surprise for you when you’re done.”

“*More* surprises?” Peter says, eyes widening. “Dad, we don’t enough room for more surprises.”

“Enough room?”

“At home,” he clarifies, even as he obediently picks up his fork. “In Queens. I don’t know where we’re gonna put all the stuff Steve bought us.”

Something alarmingly familiar to guilt wells up in him, and Bucky turns away, not wanting Peter to read the conflicted look on his face, the bitterness he can feel etched into the hard lines of his frown. “Don’t worry about that,” he says, pretending to be busy loading up his own plate. “It’s not that kind of surprise.”

Tony and Steve never do end up joining them at breakfast, so Bucky and Peter cover their plates and put their food in the refrigerator for them before they begin cleaning up. Peter is a fountain of bubbliness next to him, smiling and joking, even through groans of pain when his sore legs give him trouble. *This is okay,* Bucky thinks, as they wash the dishes side by side, almost like normal, Peter's excited rambling a familiar sound in his ears. This place may not be home, and *home* might not be a place they ever get to go back to—at least, not in the way Peter is hoping—but if things can still be like this, like they were back at their apartment, then it's okay. This is okay.

When they're finished, Bucky cups Orbie's face with his metal hand and lets it encase his arm, to Peter's curious gaze, before guiding his poor bow-legged son over to the balcony doors. Peter's expression only grows more confused as Bucky bends down and picks up the box he left there, holding it out for the boy to open.

"Is this the surprise?" he asks.

"Sure is."

Peter reaches out and opens the box, revealing the baseball and gloves that Steve had brought along with the rest of their things, the ones Bucky had given him for his birthday,. "Are these our __"

Bucky grins. "Sure are."

"Uh, I don't think Mr. Stark will like it if we play catch in here," Peter says.

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing." Bucky's smile widens as he puts a hand on the handle of the balcony door and pushes it open, gesturing down into the backyard as he does. "I guess we'll just have to play it outside."

Peter's face falls into a surprised gape. "What? We're allowed outside?"

"Stark upgraded his AI last night. Orbie will let us know if someone's coming so we can head back inside." Peter's face lights up, excitement bubbling in the grin that adorns his face, and Bucky is flooded by a sweet and familiar contentment at the sight. "As long as we stay on the property lines, we should be okay."

"That is awesome!" Peter says, taking the box from Bucky and jumping—as well as he can, with his sore legs—through the open door onto the balcony. "Come on! Let's check it out!"

Bucky returns his son's smile and follows him outside, where the sun is already beginning to warm the backyard from the morning's chill. Now that they're no longer sneaking out, they don't stay confined to the dock and the grassy shore beside it. They take their time wandering through the elaborately landscaped gardens framing the edge of the lake, all the way to the treeline of the forest which surrounds the manor.

There's an old, unkempt stone path leading through the garden, and the two of them leisurely follow it, admiring the various flowers and shrubs that steadily grow more wild and less maintained the further they get from the house, until the bushes tower over them and the branches bend at an inconvenient height, creating curtains of vines and flowers outlining the sides of the pathway.

Just before they reach the forest's edge, they find a small, open seating area secluded away behind a wall of blooming lilac bushes. There's a four-piece set of old, iron chairs with chipped white paint rooted around a metal fire pit, all of them overgrown by wild grass coiling up their bodies. "I

wish I brought my camera," Peter laments, but Bucky smiles and says, "You can bring it out later," as an idea sparks in his head. "We should make dinner out here tonight."

Peter glances at him questioningly. "Out here? At the fire pit?"

"Yeah, what do you say? We can roast hot dogs or burgers or something. It won't take much work to clean this up."

The excited grin returns to Peter's face, and he readily agrees to the idea, launching into a fit of enthusiastic rambling about how he's never built a campfire before, but he *did* accidentally start a fire in the chemistry lab once when he was experimenting with some combustible chemicals. Bucky listens as they carry on, continuing down the well-worn path, until they reach the mouth of the forest. The garden ends, but the path does not.

"Is this still Mr. Stark's property?" Peter asks.

"Must be," Bucky says, turning to look behind them. He can hear the water, but the garden is too thick to see the lake, and too tall to see the mansion's roof from here. "Why would they build a path onto their neighbor's property?"

Peter shrugs, leading the way down the path as it cuts through the woods. The stones get older, more broken and farther apart the further they go, the flat ground steadily sloping into a steeper and steeper hill the thicker the woods get. Finally, when they reach the top of the inclination, they step through the other side of the forest and onto a bright, warm field.

The first thing Bucky notices is the old, abandoned log house at the other end of the field, standing alone in a sea of knee-high grass and looking like it hasn't been touched in at least twenty years. It's modest, and judging by the location and the dilapidated state of it, Bucky assumes it was used as the servants' quarters or something, way back when. It doesn't look like a barn, even though it's the only structure in an empty field surrounded by a rotting, lopsided wooden fence, which looks even older than the house does.

The forest envelopes the field on three sides, with only the fence lying between them. The fourth side of the field hangs over the lake on a small cliff, almost treacherously, which Bucky suspects is the reason they bothered fencing it in the first place, if it wasn't meant for livestock. They can hear the water, splashing against the bottom of the cliff in gentle waves, and the wind breezing through the tall grass, making waves of a different kind. The field is pleasantly warm, without the dark shade of the trees keeping the earth cool. Bucky is tempted to close his eyes and take a deep breath, but the sight of the open, endless sea of green—the lonely little house, the family of yellow butterflies flitting through the grass—entice him to keep his eyes open, not even wanting to blink, to lose a second of this untouchably peaceful moment.

"Now I *really* wish I had my camera," Peter says. "Do you think we'd see fireflies if we came back later? I've never seen them before."

"You really are a city boy," Bucky laughs. "We're too far west for fireflies, but when we—" *If,* hisses an insidious voice inside his head, spiteful and venomous. *It's not a when, it's an if.* "—go back to New York, I'll take you camping sometime. We can see them then."

"Can we bring Ned?"

Bucky smiles and ruffles the boy's hair, gently. "Yeah, kiddo, we can bring Ned." And then he reaches into the box Peter still has gripped in his arms and grabs the baseball with his metal hand. "Now put your glove on and get ready to go long."

The two play catch for as long as Peter's sore legs will allow. At one point, Orbie disentangles himself from Bucky's arm and is thrown through the air after the ball, only narrowly caught by Peter diving for him frantically. Orbie lets out a series of thrilled beeps that sound almost like giggling, so Peter shrugs and throws him back to Bucky, the baseball remaining at his feet on the ground, forgotten. Bucky can't help but laugh every time he chucks the robot back to his son, Orbie's high-pitched, excited scream echoing through the air as he soars.

When the heat begins to become unbearable, they pack up and head back through the forest to the garden to begin cleaning the fire pit. Bucky sets to work on weeding out all the grass and other fire-hazards from the cast-iron bowl while Peter clears off the ancient chairs, and Orbie rolls around between them, making crop-circles in the long grass with his round body.

It's cooler, in the garden, with the towering bushes providing shade and the lake just a stone's throw away. Peter runs inside and grabs his camera, once the chairs are all clean, and Bucky tries to keep the smile off his face as he finishes clearing away the fire pit while Peter walks around the garden taking photos, knowing that the boy is trying to sneakily snap a few of him when he thinks Bucky's not looking.

There's still no sign of Steve or Tony when they head back inside for lunch, and Bucky feels a sharp and momentary flash of worry at the thought of the two of them fighting again, without anyone nearby to mediate. But before he can act on that worry, Peter looks up at the ceiling and asks, "Hey, Friday? Where's Mr. Stark and Steve?"

"They returned to their own rooms following their discussion earlier today, and have yet to leave them," the AI says.

Bucky sighs. "Well, that's a good sign."

A deep-set frown crosses Peter's face. "Are they okay?"

Friday is silent for a moment, as if pausing to think it over. "They were considerably calmer this morning than they were yesterday."

Peter looks at him, and Bucky can only shrug, though there's not much reassurance in it. "I'm sure they're fine, Pete. If they want to find a compromise badly enough, they will."

"I guess," Peter says. "Do you think they'll eat dinner with us later? I wanna show them how great the fire pit looks."

Bucky huffs a small laugh as he takes a sip from his glass. "I doubt Stark even knows he *has* a fire pit." Then he turns back to the ceiling and adds, "Can you let them know we're making dinner outside tonight, Friday?"

"I will let them know."

"Thanks. And, while you're at it, do you know where we could find an axe around here?"

Turns out, Stark actually has a fairly impressive collection of tools in his workshop, including a

sturdy little axe that looks like it's never been used. Once they're done cleaning up from lunch, Bucky and Peter head back into the forest and find a fallen tree perfect for firewood. Bucky shows him how to dissect the branches from the trunk, and before long they have a decent pile of logs ready to be chopped into tinder. It's comical, watching such a scrawny kid carrying a pile of firewood almost as tall as he is, but Peter doesn't complain or protest, even though Bucky's pretty sure all that wood weighs almost as much as he does.

He's in the middle of showing Peter how to build a fire when Steve peeks around the corner of lilac bushes. "Oh, there you are."

"Hey Steve," Peter says as he looks up from the fire pit, grinning. "Great timing, we're just about to start the fire!"

"I can see that." He takes a seat on one of the metal chairs Peter cleaned and leans forward to watch. "First time building a fire, Pete?"

"Yeah—well, intentionally, anyway."

Steve raises an eyebrow at him at that, and Bucky nods in his direction and asks, "You okay?"

"Oh—yeah, I'm—yeah." Steve gives him a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Hungry. Looking forward to campfire food."

"Might be a while. We've gotta let the fire burn down to a bed of coals, and then the potatoes have to cook before we can start on the hot dogs," Bucky says, more so to Peter than to Steve. "But there're leftovers from breakfast *and* lunch in the kitchen if you need something to tide you over."

"Or we could roast an entire bag of marshmallows while we wait for the potatoes to cook," Peter suggests.

Steve laughs. "I honestly couldn't tell you how long it's been since I roasted marshmallows."

"Say no more." Peter hops to his feet, setting Orbie down beside Bucky's chair. "I'll be right back!"

Both of them watch him go, and then Steve turns to him and ruefully says, "I can't help but notice that he runs to get food every time I show up."

"Stark's a bad influence on him," Bucky jokes, before looking up from the pit and giving Steve a sincere, attentive glance. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yeah. It wasn't as bad this time."

"I'm glad."

He turns back to the fire, stoking the flames just starting to catch on the tinder, until the first piece of firewood begins to burn. Steve watches him silently, both of them just listening to the gentle crackling of the fire, the waves lapping at the shore, the breeze rustling through the garden. It's quiet and peaceful, the way this whole day has been, the way horseback riding with Steve had been yesterday. Bucky can't help but think of last night, how Stark had torn apart his own ceiling to make this happen, even if he was only trying to make it up to Steve. These last two days have been nurturing in ways he can't begin to describe, and for the first time since he was framed for the bombing in Vienna Bucky is truly, genuinely glad to be here, with his family.

Just then Peter returns with the marshmallows, and he brings Tony with him.

It’s only awkward for a moment, Tony and Steve nodding to each other wordlessly, before he seems to notice the fire and asks, dumbfounded, “Where the hell did this come from?”

“It was already here,” Bucky says, gesturing to the chipped white paint covering every single chair. “And for a couple centuries, by the looks of it.”

“Huh.” Stark glances over the alcove critically, before shaking his head in disapproval. “No, no, you guys are doing this all wrong. We’re not eating hot dogs off of a bunch of sticks like cavemen. And if we’re going to sit around a fire, we’re going to do it the American way: with a beer in our hands.” He glances at Peter, then amends, “Or a juice box, if you’re a minor.”

Bucky glances at the pile of supplies he and Peter scrounged up for dinner. “We can peel the bark off your stick if it makes you feel better, Tony.”

Tony scowls at him. “We’re going to use a *grill* like civilized people, Barnes. Kid, come give me a hand. We’re going to show your old man how to do this right.”

He waits until Stark turns around, then grabs a marshmallow from Peter’s bag and beams it at the back of the man’s head. Steve grins at him, amused, and relaxes in his chair before apologetically admitting, “Actually, a beer sounds great right about now.”

Though he doesn’t admit it, Bucky agrees.

Despite the tension of the last two days, dinner actually goes by without any shouting, arguing or awkwardness to speak of. Peter and Tony sort of monopolize the conversation by boasting about Orbie and all the different things it can do, and what it was like to build it, all the little challenges and how they faced them. Bucky can’t help but smile at the pride and excitement layering Peter’s voice as he explains his robot on a level too deep for him to understand, and more than once, he looks up and catches Steve smiling at him from across the fire, his expression as warm as the flames and just as bright.

Tony brought a cooler with him when he came back with the grill, and true to his promise, he keeps a beer in each of their hands (and a can of soda in Peter’s) for most of the evening. Bucky doesn’t think he’s even capable of getting buzzed, but he can’t deny that he feels comfortably relaxed in that easy, satisfying way that alcohol tends to do. Steve seems to feel it, too, though Bucky’s almost positive he can’t get drunk at all—but the man’s posture is relaxed and open, and he’s smiling in a way that he hasn’t since they were up on that plateau yesterday.

With the sugar and the caffeine surging through his system, Peter doesn’t sit still for long, and he ends up taking off through the garden with Orbie happily tailing him. Tony sits still for all of thirty seconds before he grimaces and says, “Yikes, third wheel much,” and takes his leave, presumably to follow Peter. Bucky watches him go with no small amount of confusion, then turns his questioning gaze to Steve. “What was *that* about?”

“Just Tony being his tactful self,” Steve says, taking another sip of his beer. “He thinks he’s funnier than he actually is.”

“Well, I guess that explains why you two get along so well.”

Steve gives him a sour look, and Bucky grins, unashamed, keeping their gazes locked together as he takes a sip of his own beer. “Admit it, Stevie,” he says teasingly, the mouth of the bottle still

resting against his lips, “you’ve been a magnet for smart-mouthed punks your whole life.”

The quip he was expecting never comes. Steve doesn’t banter back, doesn’t give him so much as a shake of the head or a roll of the eyes. He just stares at Bucky, his mouth popping open, as if in surprise. It’s not quite dark yet—the sun has gone down, but the sky is still blue, the light still enduring after sunset—but Bucky still can’t make out the expression on Steve’s face, whether he looks more shocked or more relieved.

Bucky opens his mouth to ask, but before the words can come out, he’s interrupted by a frantic scream. He and Steve share identical, concerned looks at the sound of Peter’s desperate shout of, “No! No no no!” and Bucky leaps to his feet, booking it down the pathway toward the house.

It’s not until he gets closer that he recognizes the laughter in Peter’s voice, and as he leaves the thickest parts of the bush his eyes immediately land on the boy, hands thrown up in surrender, as Tony mercilessly drenches him with one of the water guns Steve had bought for them yesterday.

Peter sees him and dives out of the way of the water, latching on to Bucky and laughing as he hides behind him. “Dad, help!” he says, the water already soaking through Bucky’s shirt. “He cheated!”

“I did *not,*” Tony says, aiming the water gun toward them. “Step aside, Barnes. He started this, I’m finishing it.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Bucky says and lunges for the gun, grinning at the startled, panicked yelp Tony makes as he takes it from him. “You picked on the wrong kid, Stark.”

“*He* was picking on *me!”* Tony protests, hands covering his head as he tries to outrun the spray of water. “ORBB! Defend me!”

Orbie chirps happily and rolls upside down, like a puppy cocking its head to the side.

“Ingrates! All of you!” Stark beelines for the path, only to be blocked by Steve, who looks almost adorably confused as to what the hell he just stumbled into. Tony grabs him and pushes him toward Bucky to block the spray of water, hiding behind him desperately. “Steve! Where the hell’s your shield?! We’re under attack!”

Bucky holds his fire, but keeps the gun aimed at the other men, ready to waste both of them in an instant. Steve stares back, almost daring him to do it, and then tips his head back and drains the last of the beer in his bottle. He keeps their gazes locked as he turns and hands the empty to Tony, before confidently walking away, toward the house.

Tony looks at the empty beer bottle in his hand and then back up at Bucky, almost pleadingly. Bucky smiles back. “Any last words, Stark?”

“Hey *punk.*”

Bucky turns at the sound of Steve's voice and the grin falls from his face at the sight of the green garden hose in the other man’s hands. “Why don’t you pick on somebody your own size?”

“…Oh f—”

The word gets caught off as Steve squeezes down on the nozzle and soaks him. Bucky laughs and rushes him, his water gun a pathetic contender for the entire waterfall shooting from the garden hose. He’s distantly aware of how close he and Steve are standing suddenly, the grin on Steve’s handsome face, the faint smell of alcohol on his breath. Bucky sweeps his legs to trip him, but Steve wraps the hose around the back of his neck and pulls him down with him.

“Okay we’re going inside now,” says Tony, though neither Bucky nor Steve turn to look. “Come on Pete, I think it’s our turn to do the dishes tonight.”

“But we don’t have any dishes—”

“Then we’ll find something else to clean, it doesn’t matter, let’s go.”

Bucky grabs the nozzle of the hose to try and block the water, but Steve grapples it away from him and flips him onto his back. He can see Stark and Peter’s retreating backs from his peripheral vision, but it’s almost an afterthought under the weight of Steve’s body bearing down on him.

“Pretty sure this is my win,” Steve says through labored breath, grinning down at him.

Bucky playfully glares back. “What do you want, a medal?”

There’s a flicker of *something* in Steve’s eyes, then, a momentary flash as his gaze shifts just slightly lower, almost subconsciously. Bucky holds his breath, a sudden, unusual feeling knotting up in the pit of his stomach, hot and heavy, like the alcohol’s finally kicking in. He waits, not knowing what it is he’s waiting for, but before he can find out, Orbie comes sailing through the air and bounces off Steve’s head with a loud, resounding *thunk.*

“*Ow,*” Steve says as he rolls off of him, but Bucky erupts into a fit of laughter, laughing too hard to even ask if he’s okay. “All right all right, I’m sorry, I got carried away!”

When Bucky doesn’t—*can’t*—get a hold of himself, Steve huffs and gives him another spritz with the hose.

The sky is totally dark by the time they bring their campfire supplies inside and extinguish the fire. They’re both still dripping wet, and Steve excuses himself to go get cleaned up, while Bucky pokes his head into the living room to check on Peter and is greeted by an utterly bizarre sight.

There’s a muted movie playing on the TV, and on the couch in front of it, Tony is sitting upright with a holographic screen displayed in front of him, moving his fingers over it carefully, like he’s diffusing a bomb. He has an expression on his face to match—his eyes wide and focused—but instead of the fear of death, he looks utterly fascinated as he continuously glances down at Peter beside him.

Peter is leaning against Stark’s side, clearly fast asleep, his head resting against the other man’s bicep. Tony is carefully typing something onto his screen, as if waking Peter up would jeopardize a life-or-death mission.

“Stark,” Bucky says, quietly, so as not to wake his kid. “What’s going on?”

Tony glances at him over his shoulder, before looking back down at Peter. “Peter’s doing weird shit again.”

“What?”

The man lifts a hand, silently beckoning him over, and Bucky bends and takes Orbie into his hands to keep him quiet, then approaches with the stealth of a ghost until he’s standing in front of them, gazing down at Stark questioningly.

“Listen,” Stark whispers, pointing to Peter with his free hand. “Get close.”

Bucky can’t help the dubious, unimpressed look he gives the other man as he kneels down in front of the couch and leans in, turning his head toward the kid. At first, all he can hear is Peter’s gentle, even breaths, but then he picks up on a subtle, barely-noticeable rumble coming from the boy’s chest.

“Is he… *purring?”*

“I don’t know, do spiders purr? Is that a thing? Has he ever done this before?” Stark asks quickly, almost erratically. Bucky shrugs, secretly delighting in the panicked look Stark gives him, before he dismissively waves him away and turns back to his holopad. “Friday, add this to the file.”

Bucky raises an eyebrow at him. “You have a *file?”*

“Of course I have a file.”

“I think you should go to bed, Tony.”

“And miss out on this? Are you crazy? This is incredible.”

“Suit yourself,” Bucky says, the exhaustion of the day catching up with him. He begins to walk away, then turns back and adds, “Put him to bed when you’re done having your little scientific breakthrough or whatever. Don’t let him sleep like that all night.”

“Yes, yes, fine,” Tony says, without looking up. Bucky sighs and makes his way back to his room, depositing Orbie on the bed and then taking a note from Steve and treating himself to a long, hot shower, letting the water wash the day’s tension down the drain. He can feel his muscles relaxing under the warm spray, but the odd, unfamiliar coil in his gut isn’t affected in the slightest.

Bucky finds himself somewhat at a loss as he gets dressed, not recognizing the strange feeling low in his stomach that he can only describe as a hungry *pull.* He doesn’t even entertain the thought of going to bed as he leaves the room—firstly, checking Peter’s room next door, and upon finding him safely tucked into bed and sound asleep, he makes his way down the hall, mindless, knowing where he’s going but not knowing why.

Steve answers the door after only one knock. Bucky doesn’t move for a moment, just takes in the sight of him, his wet hair, his dark blue eyes, the stubble on his jaw already growing in from this morning. He looks somewhat out of breath, his cheeks a little pink and his T-shirt already rumpled, and the tight coil in Bucky’s gut explodes like a spring-loaded trigger and he pushes forward into the room, cupping Steve’s cheek in his hand, pressing their bodies together.

“Stevie,” he says, shuddering as one of Steve’s hands possessively threads through his hair, the other fisting in his shirt. “I—” They’re so close, he swears he can feel Steve’s heart hammering in his chest. “Can I—”

“*Yes,*” Steve gasps, and Bucky surges forward and kisses him, hungrily, lets Steve pull him fully into the room and down onto the bed, the door falling closed behind them and submerging the room into darkness.

Chapter End Notes

I'm pretty sure spiders purr as like a mating thing but we're going to bend reality a little bit and pretend it's more of a happy/sleepy/relaxed sort of deal. :P Credit for the idea goes to Scarlet_Ribbons and the rest of my discord server for being enablers.

Thank you for reading, guys! I hope you enjoyed the update.

# It Came From The Water

He can feel the body in his arms through the deep haze of sleep.

Bucky doesn't need to open his eyes to remember. There's a weight on him, warm and heavy, but the pressure is somehow comforting. It's entirely unfamiliar, but for the first time in longer than he can remember, the lack of familiarity doesn't terrify him.

He blinks his eyes open, sees the pristinely-white ceiling high above him, then looks down at his chest, at a mop of gold hair. He shifts slightly so he can see Steve's bare shoulders, his metal arm wrapped around the man's back and keeping him pressed to his chest. Steve stirs, as if sensing that Bucky's awake, and tilts his head back to blink up at him.

"Mornin'," Bucky smiles.

Steve smiles back, sleepy and content to stay that way. "Mornin' yourself."

Bucky tightens his arm around Steve's back, kisses the top of his head. This is new to him. It's dizzying, in some ways, to think of last night. The intimacy had set his nerves on fire with its intensity and unfamiliarity, but Steve was there to immediately soothe them again, like a cooling balm. The knife-sharp edge of hands on his skin couldn't last when he looked up and saw the face attached to them.

Every day he remembers more and more of Steve, before the war and even during it. Just fragments, little flashes of the two of them at different ages throughout the years, some things understandably memorable and others confusingly mundane. He remembers sleeping next to him, sharing a bed when they were kids, sharing a tent when they were soldiers. But he can't remember Steve the way he saw him last night, no matter how deeply he looks.

He doesn't ask if it was the first time. He doesn't need to know. It's irrelevant to him if Bucky Barnes was ever in love with Steve Rogers, if they ever had each other the way he had him last night. The hot, aching hunger he feels for the other man is his own. He doesn't care why he wants him, he only cares that Steve wants him back.

*You have no idea how long I've wanted this,* Steve had said, tussling with him in the sheets. Bucky hadn't asked if he meant weeks, or years, or decades. What did it matter, how long they've wanted each other or why? It didn't change that he wanted him last night, as fiercely as he wants him now.

Bucky cups the back of Steve's head and tilts it back to face him, then leans down and kisses him. Steve kisses back lazily, then is all at once fully awake and rolling on top of him, his weight considerable but enflaming that warm, pleasurable feeling in his gut.

His hands move down Steve's back slowly, tracing each hard line of muscle with the tips of his fingers until he reaches his hips. He can't help but roll his hips when he takes the swell of Steve's ass into his hands, squeezing appreciatively and making Steve laugh against his lips.

"Sorry," Steve says, breaking away from the kiss and grimacing, apologetically. "Probably got morning breath."

Bucky shrugs, moving his hands back up to Steve's hips as the man sits upright on top of him, straddling him. "We could continue in the shower," he suggests.

Steve grins playfully down at him, running his hands along Bucky's chest and stopping at his

shoulders. “That’s tempting.” He slides down the length of his body, then collapses on top of him with his head resting against Bucky’s shoulder, like a giant, muscular cat. “But I wanna stay in bed with you like this for as long as possible.”

“When did you become such a bed potato? I remember you used to kick me awake at the crack of dawn whenever we made camp.”

“We’re not at war now,” Steve yawns. “What’s a bed potato?”

“It’s like a couch potato, but for beds.”

A puff of breath tickles against his skin as Steve chuckles into his chest. “Another slang term you picked up from Peter, I’m guessing.”

“Or Ned. That’s not even the weirdest one they’ve come up with. Do you know what a meme is?”

“No?” Steve says. Then, after a pregnant pause, “Do *you?”*

“Nope. Not a clue.”

They laugh, Bucky hugging Steve to his chest a moment longer, before sighing and letting him go. “I think I need that shower, actually.”

Steve kisses his shoulder, then rolls off of him, stretching his arms above his head and drawing Bucky’s gaze down his chest and to the sharp, pronounced muscles in his lower abdomen. His hand twitches, wanting to reach out and touch. “Sure you don’t wanna join me?”

“In a minute,” Steve says, smiling up at him as he stretches his legs next, languidly. “Go ahead. I’m right behind you.”

“Uh huh. Don’t fall back asleep.”

“Feel free to wake me up if I do.”

Smiling, Bucky heads for the ensuite bathroom, stopping in front of the sink to brush his teeth. His gaze trails the dark pattern of hickies along the column of his throat, his shoulder and the deep ridges of his collarbones, seemingly beginning to fade away already, though barely.

It’s odd, looking at himself. He knows it’s ridiculous, but Stark’s extravagantly-expensive mirrors almost seem clearer than the ones he’s used to. Better lit, at the very least. He can see details in his face he’s never noticed before, how badly he needs a haircut. And a shave.

He grabs the razor, figuring Steve won’t mind, but doesn’t get a chance to reach for the shaving cream before he hears Peter, anxiously calling, “Hey, Steve? Are you in there?”

There’s knocking on the door, loud and somewhat frantic. Peter’s voice filters in without giving either of them a chance to reply. “Uhm—Dad wasn’t in his room or the kitchen and I’ve looked everywhere else and I’m kind of freaking out—”

Bucky rips open the bathroom door, just as Steve answers the one to the bedroom. Neither of them are able to get a word out before Peter continues rambling, “I went to wake him up because Mr. Stark said Mr. T’Challa’s on the phone and wants to talk to us, but now I can’t find him anywhere and he doesn’t have Orbie—”

“Peter—”

Bucky steps forward into the kid's line of sight, cutting him off mid-word as their eyes meet. Relief floods Peter's face, before he takes the whole picture in—the two of them, dressed in nothing but sweatpants, the rest of their clothes strewn across the floor. The unmade bed. The splattering of dark hickies covering Bucky and the light ones covering Steve. Steve's hair sticking up every which way, like he'd just jumped out of a moving plane. Again.

Peter only looks confused for a second before it clicks. Bucky sees it, the realization washing over him, barreling him over like a tsunami. He sees it because Peter's face goes redder than the Iron Man suit, and then he grabs the door out of Steve's hands and slams it closed, angrily shouting, "Oh my God! *Dad!* At least get dressed before you answer the door! Gross!"

He tries to call out an apology, but he hears Peter's retreating footsteps, loud and urgent like he's running from the closed door. He stands there, mouth open, keeping it together until Steve looks back at him helplessly, and then he's collapsing onto the edge of the bed, laughing.

Steve composes himself, running a hand through his hair. "Well, if you were wondering how to tell him, I guess we've taken care of that."

"I think we traumatized him," Bucky says, forehead hanging in his hands.

"Parenting is hard."

Chuckling, Bucky peeks up at him through his fingers. "You have no idea. You sure you wanna be a part of this?"

Stepping forward between his legs, Steve cups his face and leans down to kiss him. Bucky runs his hands up Steve's lower back reflexively, in a way that feels almost natural, like it's instinctual to touch him.

"I want to be a part of your life and I want you to be a part of mine," Steve says, his hands on either side of Bucky's face, keeping their gazes locked together.

Bucky takes him by the nape of his neck and brings his face down to kiss him again. "I could be a part of you right now," he offers. Steve laughs against his lips, deepening the kiss before pulling away.

"We should probably go find out what T'Challa wants, first," he says, regretfully. "Chances are it's important, and I think Peter said they're waiting for us."

The reminder of T'Challa kills the lingering mood waking up next to Steve had caused, and Bucky merely nods and follows his lead of getting dressed. He catches Steve watching him as he pulls a borrowed pair of jeans up his legs, but the heat he feels in the pit of his stomach is muted under the thought of what could be waiting for him outside this room.

Steve, as if sensing the tight coil of anxiety that's made its home in his gut, gently pulls him in by the nape of his neck and softly kisses his forehead. "It's okay," he says, comfortingly. "Whatever it is, we'll get through it together."

Bucky smiles at the words of comfort, but instead of soothing his anxiety, they add a layer of guilt to the tension in his body. He feels a sinking urge to see Peter, all of a sudden, remembering the tremor in his voice when he thought Bucky was missing. He should be out there comforting his son, not in here accepting that comfort from Steve.

They head for the main living room once they're fully dressed and find Tony and Peter waiting for them on one of the sofas. Peter's face goes red when he looks at Steve, but Bucky can see his

nervousness in the way he's holding himself; the bouncing of his legs on the floor, the anxious tapping of his fingers on his kneecap. His shoulders are hunched, and even though Bucky can tell he's still completely embarrassed by what happened a few minutes ago, he looks at Bucky imploringly when their eyes meet, that terribly familiar look he gets when he needs to hear that everything's okay.

Tony's expression couldn't be further in the opposite direction. He stares at Bucky—specifically at his collar area—in stark disbelief for what feels like a full five seconds before he gives Steve the most unimpressed look Bucky's ever seen. He almost laughs at the sight of it, and especially when Steve's cheeks go sheepishly pink under the heat of Stark's stare and he pointedly looks away. He doesn't know why, but the knowledge that Tony is able to reduce Steve to an expression like that with a single look completely delights him.

Thankfully, Tony doesn't dish out the lecture he looks like he's serving up, instead clearing his throat and evenly saying, "Okay, T'Challa, the gang's all here."

"This won't take long," T'Challa says through Friday's speakers, his voice settling all around them the way the AI's does. "I know who was responsible for the bombing in Vienna."

The four of them share a look of relieved disbelief. Steve speaks first, leaning forward despite the fact that T'Challa's here in voice only. "Who was it?"

"His name is Baron Zemo."

A holographic screen opens in front of them, displaying the cold, emotionless face of a man Bucky doesn't recognize. Peter, Steve and Tony all turn and look at him, but Bucky simply shakes his head, not knowing what to say. "He doesn't look or sound familiar," he says apologetically. "I don't know him."

"He certainly knows *you,*" says T'Challa. "He's killed three Hydra agents trying to find you."

Steve's face darkens, his eyes narrowing until the blue of his irises seems impossibly black. Bucky's almost unnerved to see that kind of look on Steve's face, a kind of cold fury he never thought he was capable of until this very moment.

"He hasn't left any witnesses, so at the moment we don't know what his goal is. It's safe to assume that he is after the Winter Soldier. That's why he used your face to bomb the UN in Vienna, in order to flush you out of hiding." T'Challa's smooth, even tone catches just slightly, almost indistinctly; the barest hint of grief bleeding into it.

"Used my face?" Bucky asks, a sick feeling swirling in his stomach. "How the hell did he do that?"

"A mask. I confiscated it from his hotel room."

A cold feeling settles under his skin. He doesn't know this Baron Zemo guy, but that doesn't mean he—doesn't mean *Hydra* hasn't done something to cause this kind of bloody vendetta. He tries to search the broken, fragmented flashes in his memory, something he rarely does willingly, to try and find any missing link that connects him to this no-longer-nameless killer who used his face to murder dozens of innocent people.

But nothing comes. Even the horribly, sickeningly clear memories he can recall of his mission debriefs and the horror that came after don't offer any solutions as to who this guy is and why he's killing people to find him.

"Where is he now?" Steve asks. Bucky looks over at him and is surprised by how level his voice

is, considering the tight, tense anger evident in his clenched fists, the way his jaw is set. The cold rage rolling off him in waves is almost dizzying. For a second, Bucky genuinely pities this Zemo guy.

“I will find him soon,” T’Challa promises. “Now that I know his face and his target, it’s only a matter of time before I have him cornered. He will not get away with this, Captain.”

“No,” Steve agrees, icily. “He won’t.”

“It’d go faster if you’d let us help,” says Tony, offering as politely as he’s capable of. “We could team up and really nail this son of a bitch. Two days, tops.”

There’s actually a hint of amusement in T’Challa’s reply. “I appreciate the sentiment, Stark, but there’s no need. This is *my* mission.” None of them jump at the chance to contradict him, not with the staunch level of conviction in the man’s tone. “Besides,” he says, a little lighter, “you and Captain Rogers have your hands full. Ross grows increasingly restless. He wants those signatures on his Accords.”

Tony and Steve glance at each other, wordlessly. A somewhat awkward silence falls between the four of them, before Stark breaks his gaze away, sighs and says, “Yeah, we’re—uh, we’re working on that.”

“If you two can come to an agreement, the rest will follow,” T’Challa says, almost reassuringly. “I will find Zemo and bring him to justice. In the meantime, you two must find the solution.” There’s a sort of ageless, unmistakable wisdom in the man’s voice, and though Bucky’s not the one he’s speaking to, he feels bolstered by his words. He’s never even been to Wakanda, and yet he’s comforted to realize that T’Challa will make a good king. “Your team is counting on you.”

Tony sighs, dejectedly. “Yes sir,” he says. Out of the corner of his eye, Bucky sees Steve smirk. “We’ll deal with Ross. Have fun on your murderer hunt.”

“I will. More than you, in any case.” T’Challa’s practically chuckling on the other end of the line. “I will be in touch.”

There’s a short click, and then Friday says, “Prince T’Challa has disconnected.”

The four of them sit quietly for a minute, and then Peter smiles and says, “I like him.”

Bucky returns his smile, reaches over and ruffles the kid’s hair. “Yeah. I like him, too.” He looks to his right, where Steve is gazing down at his folded hands in his lap. Steve smiles at him when their eyes meet, but it’s muted and tight, and it makes Bucky sigh and pull Peter to his feet as he stands.

“C’mon, Pete,” he says, taking the boy under his arm. “Let’s go cook up some breakfast.”

Peter glances at Tony and Steve still on the couches, then realizes what Bucky is doing and says, “Can we make it outside? At the fire pit?”

“Great idea.”

He looks back at Steve and gives him a small, reassuring smile. Steve nods back, dutifully, and turns to face Tony head-on, so Bucky leads Peter out of the room to give them some privacy.

Maybe it was the confidence in T’Challa’s tone, or maybe it’s the good mood from last night and this morning spilling over onto everything else, but regardless, Bucky doesn’t have a shred of doubt

that the two of them will put this argument behind them if they're just given a chance. So he takes Peter down to the kitchen and the two load up everything they'll need to cook breakfast outside, a sweet and easy peace laying warm and welcoming in his gut.

It's such a calming feeling that Bucky doesn't even realize how quiet Peter's being until he's already building the campfire. He looks up sharply when the thought of, *he hasn't said much,* hits him, and looks at Peter closely, trying to see what's wrong. But Peter looks calm and lost in thought, not hunched over and scared, or anxious. He's just *quiet,* which is usually how Bucky knows that something's wrong. But he's used to being able to tell *what* when he looks at Peter, and not being able to doesn't sit well with him.

"You okay, Pete?" he asks, startling the boy out of his thoughts, almost making him drop Orbie in his lap. He tries to think of what could be on his mind, and when it finally comes to him, his face flushes a little and he says, "Are you, uh—you mad about earlier? About me and Steve?"

Surprise colors the boy's face. "Mad?" he says, like it's a word he's never heard before. "No, Dad, I'm not—why would I be mad?"

"I don't know," Bucky admits. "Sometimes change can be upsetting, so I just thought—"

"Are things going to change?"

"They might change a little," Bucky admits. "I don't really know what Steve is planning to do, from now on, in regards to us, but—well, if he wants to become a bigger part of our lives, then—"

"But will things change…" Peter looks up at him, his voice small, a slight tremble in his lower lip, "...between us?"

"What?" Bucky wraps his arm around the kid's shoulders immediately, wanting to pull him against his side but not wanting Peter to look away from his face. "Peter, are you crazy? That's not the kind of change I was talkin' about." When Peter tries to turn away, he takes the boy's face in his hands to keep him looking at him.

"Look, Steve might be around a lot more, but you and me? That's not going anywhere. *You're* not going anywhere." His hands fall from the boy's face to his thin shoulders. He squeezes reassuringly, despite how small and fragile Peter feels beneath his palms. "I know that, Steve knows that. How can you not know that?"

Peter shakes his head, trying to hide the slight, wet sheen in his eyes. "I know, Dad. It's irrational, it's just—just the thought of, what if Steve wants to have a family with you, but not—not *our* family? I'd just hate it if—if you felt like you had to choose between Steve and—"

"That's not a choice, Peter." He gives his shoulders a little shake, trying to knock the sense right into him. "You listening to me? That wouldn't even be a situation. I don't wanna be with *anybody* who doesn't want to be a part of this. Doesn't matter who they are."

The hopeful look in Peter's eyes makes Bucky want to cry. It's almost insulting to think that Peter could still have doubts about what he means to him, about the lengths Bucky would go to keep them together. But he reminds himself of all the homes Peter has lost in his very short life, over and over again, and tries not to take it personally.

"You're my kid. Just because I didn't make you doesn't mean I don't love you. And I'm going to expect as much from anybody I'm with, whether it's Steve or anyone else—if they can't think of you as their son too, then they're not the right person for me."

“I don’t want you to be unhappy,” Peter says, sniffling. “I don’t want you to regret meeting me.”

“Peter, I regret so many things that I’ve done, even someone as smart as you could never count them all.” He cups the boy’s cheeks again, wipes away the tears running down them with the pads of his thumbs. “But I will never, *ever* regret meeting you.”

Peter wraps his arms around his neck and hugs him tightly, burying his face in his shoulder so Bucky can’t see him sob. But Bucky can still feel it in the slight tremor in Peter’s back, in his arms and shoulders, and he wraps his own arms tightly around Peter’s middle and crushes him against his chest, wanting him to *get it,* to know, without a doubt, that he’s not going anywhere.

Relief washes over him as he finally steps into the warm shower, the water steaming hot and soothing as it runs down his body.

Steve and Tony never joined them at breakfast, so Peter offered to handle the clean-up so Bucky could finally take that shower he so badly wanted. He almost sighs as he tips his head back under the warm spray, his muscles loosening from the heat and gentle pummeling of the water on his skin.

It dumbfounds him that Peter could ever believe he would let someone come between them. The idea of losing Steve now hurts, yes, the thought makes him dizzyingly nauseas when he pictures it, but if anything is capable of making him lose the feelings he’s developed for the other man since that day he showed up in their kitchen, asking Bucky to choose between him and his son would be it.

That’s really the difference between him and Peter, he knows. Peter’s had other families. He’s had parents, he’s had guardians, he’s had foster siblings to take care of. He’s witnessed families fall apart and people breaking their promises, and considering just how many people have come in and out of his life in even just these last few years, everything probably feels terrifyingly temporary to him, even now.

But for Bucky, Peter’s *it.* He knows there was a family, a long time ago. But he doesn’t even have names to assign to them, let alone faces. He probably used to think of Steve as family, given just how many flashes of the man’s face appear in his memories, but the way he feels about him now is something entirely new.

And Steve would never ask him to do such a thing. It’s almost laughable, trying to imagine Steve telling him that he doesn’t want to be together if Peter is in the picture. Steve’s just not the type to be self-centered like that, let alone that dismissive. Even Peter had admitted that the idea is irrational.

But just because it’s irrational doesn’t mean it’s not a terrifying thought, and Bucky’s heart aches for his kid, wondering how often Peter’s plagued by thoughts of having his entire life ripped away from him *again.* It must be hell, living like that, wondering when the other shoe will drop, when the good things will end, like they always do, because nothing ever lasts.

He sighs, closing his eyes as he shampoos his hair. Maybe he should talk to Tony, later, about ways to help Peter manage feeling like that. He’s sure that kind of help would take resources, but given how close they’ve become since they were brought here, he doesn’t think Tony would mind. He’s a good guy.

Maybe he should apologize to him for being so hostile in the beginning. Tony's a rude little shit, but he's stuck his neck out for them, even if it was only for Peter and Steve's sake, at first. It's almost alarming when Bucky realizes, belatedly, that he *likes* Tony Stark, that he considers the other man a *friend.*

It's an alien feeling. He has a son, he had a boss and acquaintances back in Queens, neighbors, familiar shopkeepers—but *friendship?* That almost sounds like something mythical, a thing that only happens to other people.

Steve… doesn't count. He doesn't know what Steve is, but it's not anywhere near the same realm as Tony. Everything about it feels different, even the things that, logically, should feel the same. Bantering with Steve shouldn't feel different than bantering with Tony, yet it does. Having Steve watch him from across a room shouldn't feel different, yet it does. The sight of Steve engaging with Peter, showing him kindness and attention and affection shouldn't feel different than the annoyance-turned-resignation-turned-apathy he feels when it's Tony. But it does.

It fills Bucky with an almost painful amount of tenderness, when he sees Steve and Peter together, the smiles on both of their faces. His heart feels like it's ready to burst, the safest and happiest he can remember feeling in his entire life.

His hair is still wet from the shower, dripping onto his shoulders and soaking through his shirt, but Bucky doesn't move to tie it up, not wanting to catch Steve and Peter's attention and ruin the moment he's spying on.

He doesn't know where they got the wood from, but Steve is showing him how to arrange it, where to measure and cut so they can assemble it into what looks like the beginning of a birdfeeder. He can barely hear their voices through the glass doors, watching them sitting on the deck as they work together, both of them smiling and laughing in the afternoon sun.

It feels different. Tony Stark could one day become his best friend and it wouldn't compare to this —wouldn't compare to the sight of the two people he cares for most, smiling together, the happy, adoring look on Peter's face, that face he loves so much, his favorite thing in all the world. He's used to Peter looking at him like that. But seeing him give that look to Steve makes his heart feel just as full.

He watches Orbie make circles around the pair as they work, feeling like he's standing on the edge of a different world, peering in. He decides to leave them, letting them have their time together, not wanting to spoil anything, least of all the hopeful thought of the two of them growing closer.

Instead, he steps into the main living room, where Tony is lounging with three different holographic screens pulled up in front of him, somehow managing to work on all three at once. He doesn't acknowledge Bucky as he enters, his eyes darting furiously, showing his hands where to follow, almost just as fast.

"You're dexterous," Bucky observes aloud.

Tony yelps and smacks one of the screens dead in the center, bringing up an array of angry, red pop-ups. "Oh my God, *stop that!"*

"Sorry," he says, entirely not sorry. "You'd get startled less if you didn't zone out as much, you know."

"You'd startle me less if you so much as cast a shadow, you goddamn apparition."

Bucky grins, taking a seat on the couch across from the one the other man's sitting on. "What are you working on?"

"Legal junk," Tony says as he goes back to working, focused on the screens in front of him and apparently not bothered by Bucky staring at him through the slightly-transparent holographs. "Steve and I are gonna write up the first draft of our counter-proposal, so…"

"Counter-proposal?" Surprise colors his tone. "For the Accords? Tony, that's great."

"Yeah, well, we'll see if they take the bait or not. Most likely *not.* We might end up having to fight our way out of this anyway, but…" He swallows, trying to hide how relieved he is, but it's clear as day on his face. "At least we'll all be fighting on the same side."

"It's a compromise, then?"

Tony smiles at him through the screen. "A solution, as T'Challa so succinctly put it. Gives me and —hopefully—the rest of the world the security they need for us to keep doing what we do, but lets us keep the freedom we need to actually do it." He grimaces like he stepped in something foul. "Ross won't go for it. I already know what he'll say. But, some of the UN councillors might. We just need to convince enough of them to push Ross out. That's kind of the immediate goal here."

He can't keep the smile off his face. "I know it was tough getting here, but you guys really came through. I'm glad you worked it out."

"Yeah," Tony says. "Same here."

There's a lull then, as Tony continues working away, and Bucky turns to gaze out the large windows, where the lake stretches on seemingly in infinite directions. He thinks he can hear Steve and Peter hammering their birdfeeder together when he listens closely, but he's too far away to be sure.

He thinks back to last night, to thoughts of Steve, but doesn't linger there. That's not the kind of thing he wants to imagine or even think of imagining while sitting across from Tony. Instead he thinks of Peter, of the conclusion he came to earlier, and looks back at Tony, resolutely. "I think Peter might have abandonment issues."

"A drunk toddler could have told you that," Tony snorts. "What gave it away? The fact that he refuses to spend more than four minutes by himself, if that? Or was it the nervous breakdown he had when he found out about your and Steve's engagement that tipped you off?"

"He didn't have a nervous breakdown," Bucky frowns. "And we didn't get engaged."

"I didn't mean *engagement* engagement, I meant like, you *engaged* in—never mind." He actually closes the screen directly in front of him and fixes Bucky with a blunt look. "That kid spent weeks on the street before he met you. Yeah, he was attending classes during the day, but that kind of socialization only does so much for a kid, mentally. He went weeks without anybody saying so much as a kind word to him. And before that? Any attention he was given at all sounds like it was pretty abusive."

He turns back to his screens, as if needing to move his hands while he talks, a way to take the energy out of his limbs. "Above all else, Peter's terrified of being alone. And look, for the record, I'm not blaming you at all. You did the best you could with what you had, and from what Peter tells me, you saved that kid's life. But he went from a crushingly lonely way of living to suddenly having all the love and attention he could want from somebody who frankly had nothing better to

do but give it to him."

Bucky doesn't know what to say, just watches Tony work, numbly.

"So now I think he's gone kind of too far in the *other* direction. He's got some pretty serious separation anxiety, and maybe we'll get lucky, and with some normalcy and routine, he'll overcome it. But you're not doing him any favors by suffocating him, Bucky."

"Do I suffocate him?"

Tony looks at him, his eyes dark, but not hostile. "He doesn't see it that way."

A feeling he can only describe as *shame* comes over him. He's known since the moment he laid eyes on Peter that he isn't good for him, for so many reasons, but it's disillusioning and even heartbreaking to realize that he's been failing the boy in more ways than he was even aware of.

Sighing, Tony rubs his hand over his eyes, regretfully. "Hey, this isn't an attack, okay? It's—y'know—it's good we're talking about it. It means we can get you guys some help, get things on the up and up, all that jazz." He tries for what Bucky's sure is supposed to be a reassuring look, though it just looks pinched and uncomfortable. "I meant what I said. I think you're a good dad. And more importantly, Peter does, too."

"He's talked to you a lot," Bucky says, thinking aloud. "I don't want him going his whole life feeling like the rug's about to be pulled out from under his feet. I don't want him to feel like he has to build elaborate robots to stop someone from taking me away from him. I don't want him to be scared every time he leaves the house that it's the last time he's ever gonna see me alive."

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his upper body slouching until he's almost folded on them. "But he hides it so damn well. He seems so bubbly and carefree all the time, and then the smallest thing comes along, the littlest whiff of trouble, and it's like he crumbles under his own anxiety. I'm not trying to feed that response in him, I just—all I can think to do is comfort him. It's like an instinct. I just don't have anything else, Tony."

He cradles his forehead in his metal hand, defeated. "God, Tony, he doesn't even *know.* He has no idea how damn important he is to me. I know his anxiety gives him all these crazy ideas, but it's insane to me that after all this, after everything we've been through, he could ever think there's anything on this goddamn Earth I'd choose over him. He's my *son.*"

"Anxiety makes us question everything, even things that should be absolute fact. He knows you love him. It's just the trauma talking, when he gets scared like that."

He kind of looks like he wants to reach over the coffee table and pat Bucky's shoulder or something, but instead, he mirrors Bucky's hunched-over position and offers, "It's going to get easier, Buck. You guys aren't on your own anymore. When this whole mess is over and we take you home, we can go from there. It'll be easier when you guys move in to the tower; you'll both have other people around to spend time with, pretty much all the time. And if we need to get a doctor's opinion, then we will. This isn't something you gotta solve all by yourself."

He smiles at him, and Bucky tries his best to return it, touched by the sight. "And Peter's still young," he continues. "He'll start wanting to spend more time with his friends and less with his parents, and then you'll be crying on my couch because he's giving you the cold shoulder instead of clinging to you 24/7."

Bucky glares at him. "I am not crying."

A teasing, shit-eating smirk is his only reply, before Tony returns to his work and Bucky returns to his window, his mind racing, his heart filled with tentative hope despite the ache.

When Peter and Steve finally join them inside hours later, it's to present the beautiful, hand-painted birdfeeder they assembled together for Peter's bedroom window. Peter displays it proudly when they walk in, and Bucky catches Steve's gaze and smiles at him, warmly, as Peter gives him the excited rundown of the entire building process.

The four have dinner and watch TV together before bed, and Bucky can feel Steve lingering behind him as he says goodnight to Peter, the man practically vibrating on the balls of his feet. They manage to keep their hands off each other until they make it back to Steve's room, but the moment the door is shut Steve is crowding him against it and kissing him, his hands tangling in Bucky's long hair.

"God, I wanted to do this all day," he hisses, biting softly at Bucky's lip. "You have no idea how hard it is to keep my hands off you. It's like torture."

"Sweet-talker," Bucky jokes, hands trailing down to Steve's ass and groping it through his jeans, wanting nothing more than to pull them down. "Consider this your torture lifting," he says before sucking a deep bruise into Steve's throat, his hands tightening when Steve moans, before they walk backwards to the bed and one or both of them pulls the other down eagerly.

It takes two more days of Steve and Tony going back and forth over their counter-proposal before they finally have a draft they're both totally happy with (*and,* Tony adds, snappishly, *can easily defend in court).* There's no news from T'Challa regarding Zemo or his location, so reluctantly, Steve agrees to the meeting Tony sets up with Ross and the other key members of the UN council to formally present their counter-proposal alongside the rest of the Avengers.

"This is going to be a shit-show," Steve sighs as he finishes folding his Captain America uniform into his bag, his face tight with displeasure. "God, I wish you were coming with me."

"So do I," Bucky says, running a comforting hand down his back. "We'll be here when you get back. And next time you have to make the trip home, all this will be over and I'll be going with you."

"I can't wait," Steve says, earnestly, turning and pulling Bucky in for a kiss by the nape of his neck. "I'll call, all right? And you'll probably see us on the news, anyway. Tony says the media's all over this thing."

"Doesn't surprise me." Bucky grins, playfully. "You're something of a celebrity, *Captain.*"

Steve groans. "Don't start with me."

"Yes sir."

They share a laugh, Steve letting his forehead fall against Bucky's shoulder, like he's garnering up the strength to leave their room. Bucky simply holds him in his arms, soaking up the physical contact, since he has to go without it for the next couple of days. "We'll celebrate when you get back," he promises, pressing a kiss to the man's shoulder. "We'll watch the season finale of Game of Thrones and watch Tony get wine-drunk again."

Steve laughs against his neck, sending tingling waves over his skin. "That sounds great," he says as

he pulls away, unenthusiastically. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too.”

They share a soft kiss, light and unhurried, just a gentle token of affection. Bucky follows Steve out into the entryway where Tony is waiting, sunglasses on and phone in hand, a sleepy and bed-headed Peter yawning beside him.

“Have a safe trip,” Peter says to them, leaning against Bucky’s side when standing proves to be too difficult for his sleep-addled brain. Both Tony and Steve give the kid matching, fond looks, Steve ruffling his already-messy hair and Tony smirking as he says, “We will. Go get some more sleep before you fall over.”

“’Kay,” Peter replies, eyes already closed, letting Bucky take almost all his weight.

With that, the two men leave, and as soon as Bucky watches their car drive away he’s guiding Peter over to the couches and depositing him on one of them to go back to sleep. Peter’s out before his head even touches the cushion, so Bucky drapes a blanket over him and takes a seat on the adjacent armchair, watching the sun finish rising over the lake, the herons flying low over the water.

It feels almost *odd* to be alone with Peter after these last couple of weeks of being here. The mansion felt overwhelmingly large when it was the three or four of them, but with just the two, it’s almost daunting how empty it feels. There’s a deep, eerie silence that seems to descend on the house like a cloud of fog, as if the very structure of the building is suddenly noise-cancelling.

Peter and Bucky keep busy as they pass the time waiting for T’Challa to call or Steve and Tony to come back. They cook, they play games, Peter catches him up on the entire *Disney Masterpiece Collection* now that he has internet readily at his fingertips. The first night they cook dinner at the campfire again, something Bucky is quickly realizing has become a favorite of Peter’s, and the day after that they play in the lake and Bucky finds a book from Tony’s library to occupy himself while Peter wanders the garden, taking photos with his camera.

Bucky’s surprised to realize he feels *lonely,* without Steve and Tony, even though Peter is almost always beside him. A few weeks ago, he would have jumped at the chance to be left alone with his son without the other two men circling around them like vultures. And now the house is deafeningly quiet and the remoteness of the lake and forest around them feels more like a prison than the wide open wilderness it really is.

They watch Steve and Tony on the news the second day, just like Steve had suspected they would. The media coverage is vague at best and frustratingly basic at worst, though it does offer a shot of the Avengers, sitting behind their bench at the UN’s conference, all in uniform and wearing matching, tight-lipped expressions. Bucky wants to call Steve the moment he sees his face, wants to make sure he’s okay, but it’s uplifting listening to Tony snark and banter with the infamous Thaddeus Ross in a way that makes the man’s pale face burn red behind his podium.

When the broadcast is over, they head outside simply to escape the suffocating feeling of staying inside their silent mansion. Taking pictures of the birds and butterflies slowly turns into cloud-gazing from the end of the dock, and when Peter can’t sit still any longer, they take their baseball mitts and ball and head to the field beyond the forest to play catch.

The afternoon sun is hot as it beats down on them, but Peter doesn’t let that stop him from diving for the ball, no matter how far Bucky chucks it. Both of them treat it like a training exercise, trying to burn off some of that pent-up energy flowing inside of them. They make a game of it, the way

they used to back in Queens, and after a few hours of playing catch and some light sparring to keep their reflexes up, Peter finally collapses into the long grass, exhausted.

Bucky laughs, not even able to see the kid from how tall the grass in the field is. Peter looks like a groundhog when his head pops back up, and he sluggishly pulls his body up and drags himself over to where Bucky's standing, his skin damp with sweat.

"I wish we could go horseback riding again," Peter says, taking a seat beside Bucky on a steep little hill where the grass is just slightly shorter. Orbie rolls around them cheerfully, then bounces up the hill just so he can roll down it again, over and over like it's a slide. "Can we go again after this is all over?"

"Definitely," Bucky says, wrapping his arm around his kid's shoulders as they watch a breeze ripple through the field. They listen to the waves crash against the bottom of the short cliff they're perched on for a quiet, serene moment, Orbie nudging against his foot, Bucky lowering his metal hand and letting the bot wrap around it, like a bird returning to its nest. "Steve wants to go again, too."

Peter leans against his side, relaxes into his chest. "You really like him," he says.

His face heats up, and Bucky coughs, clearing his throat to try and dislodge the awkwardness that's suddenly taken root there. "Yeah, I—I do."

"I'm glad," Peter says, closing his eyes when Bucky idly strokes his metal hand through his curls. "And not just because I get to tell people my dad is dating Captain America."

Bucky laughs, ruffling the boy's head a little harder, before an intrusive thought hits him and he goes cold.

"And you're—" he says, pausing to rethink his words, not sure how to say it right, "you're all right that it's—that Steve's a man? That doesn't bother you, does it?"

Peter sits up straight, raising an eyebrow at Bucky like he just started speaking a foreign language. "What? Dad, of course that doesn't bother me," he says, almost like he's insulted. "Do you really think I'd be upset about something like that?"

"No," Bucky smiles, pulling the boy back against his side. "I didn't think so, Pete. I just wanted to make sure."

Peter's quiet under his arm, then asks, curiously, "Would it bother you if *I* dated a man?"

"Yes," Bucky says, immediately, feeling Peter laugh against his side, the little shit. "A *man?* No way in hell. Not until you're thirty-five, at *least*. But a kid your own age? …Also no. Just, please give me time before you start bringing *anyone* home, Pete. Man or woman. You can love whoever you want. When you're older."

"Deal," Peter says, still laughing warmly against his chest, bringing a smile to Bucky's face, too.

They sit for a while longer, watching the lake and the field on either side of them, just basking in the afternoon sun and the cool breeze drifting over them, listening to the waves below them and the chorus of birds above them. It's soothing, being out here, his son under his arm and nothing but wildlife all around them. He wishes Steve were here, but other than that, it's a perfect moment. He hugs Peter a little tighter against him, content to let it last forever.

But Peter sits up again and pushes himself to his feet. "I'm gonna go grab something to drink," he

says, shuffling down the hill. Bucky notices a white line on the back of his neck where his shirt is pressed against his skin and calls after him, “Put on some more sunscreen while you’re at it!”

“’Kay!”

He watches him go, until he disappears into the mouth of the forest, following the trail back onto the estate grounds and totally out of sight. Bucky stretches out on the grass as he waits, a cloud rolling over the sun and darkening the green field with murky shade.

It’s the splash of water he hears first.

Everything is rhythmic on the field. The grass and trees blowing in the wind, the waves rolling against the base of the cliff—even the birds call in predictable notes if you’ve been listening long enough to be able to tell. Bucky’s catalogued every sound in this remote corner of the world of theirs, so it’s the splash he hears first.

It’s a forceful splash, against the current, loud and sloshing against the base of the cliff. Bucky doesn’t know what’s wrong. He doesn’t know why he gets to his feet, why the sick feeling of dread has started pumping through his veins with every erratic beat of his heart. Something is coming. He doesn’t know what, but the slosh of water on the cliffside has his instincts screaming at him to run.

And then it comes from the water.

The cliff is barely taller than a man. Bucky thinks it’s a bear, at first; just this amorphous, black *shape* climbing over the ledge of the cliff and onto the grass in front of him. But as it pulls itself up straight, Bucky realizes it’s a human being, dressed in light but durable tactical gear, a black gun with a heavy-duty silencer sitting heavy in his palms.

He’s not wearing a mask. He lifts his face and meets Bucky’s gaze, stares straight ahead at him, expressionless.

It’s Zemo.

Bucky doesn’t have a chance to move or dodge as he lifts the gun. It fires, the silencer producing a loud, explosive *pop* but no more as the bullet slices through the air toward him. Bucky doesn’t move in time to block the shot.

But Orbie does.

It stuns him—*both* of them, judging by the look on Zemo’s face—when his hand swipes in front of him easily, knocking the bullet away with a sharp, metallic *clink.* They stare at each for a moment, the gun still raised, before Zemo scowls and starts to pull something from the pocket of his vest.

“I don’t know what Hydra did to you,” Bucky says, his hands up, trying to deescalate the situation. He keeps his peripheral vision locked on the mouth of the forest, terrified that any moment, Peter will come sprinting through. “But I never wanted to do anything they forced me to. It was mind control, I wasn’t—I never wanted to be their bloodhound. Whatever they forced me to do to you, I’m sorry.”

“They didn’t force you to do anything to me,” Zemo says. Bucky places the accent immediately. Sokovian? *Why the hell*—“And I know all about the mind control, James.”

Bucky feels sick at the sight of the little red notebook Zemo pulls from his pocket, the black Hydra insignia painted on the front. He knows that book. He knows what it means. *No,* he thinks

desperately, taking a step back. Zemo keeps the gun pointed at him as he flips the book open to a page that's already marked.

"*Longing.*"

Bucky turns and runs. He heads for the forest, for the path that leads to the mansion, planning to just take Peter and run. But Zemo fires his gun again and Orbie yanks Bucky down to the ground to avoid the shot, knocking the wind out of him with a sharp gasp.

"*Rusted.*"

"Stop," Bucky says, rolling over and pushing himself up, his teeth bared, like a caged animal. "Stop it!"

"*Furnace.*"

With a desperate shout, Bucky lunges forward, but Zemo lurches back and fires two more shots, shouting, "*Daybreak! Seventeen!"* as Orbie once again pulls him out of the way to avoid both bullets.

"Please," Bucky says, dirt and grass tangling in his hands and hair as he pushes himself back up, but his body feels so *weak.* He can feel the roaring in his head, the furious pounding, like someone's using his brain as a drum, striking him over and over. "Stop, *please.*"

"*Benign.*"

"Orbie," Bucky gasps helplessly. "Call—call for help. Call Steve. Call Tony. T—T'Challa. Can you—"

"*Nine.*"

There's no reply, but he feels a slight vibration in his arm, from the tips of his fingers to his elbow. He remembers Tony telling him that Orbie can only speak in binary, and prays the robot was able to send the message for him.

"*Homecoming.*"

Bucky pushes himself onto shaky legs, turning to face Zemo, his chest heaving. He clenches his jaw to stop himself from screaming at the pain that wracks his body, his mind a searing, agonizing sea of *white* that makes him want to dig the heels of his palms into his eyes to block it out.

"*One.*"

He wobbles on his feet. Then, desperately, a last-ditch effort, lunges for the man's gun. Zemo fires, Orbie moves his hand. *Good bot,* he thinks, knocking the bullet away, sending it flying behind him.

And then he hears the gasp.

Zemo's face falls, his gun lowering, slightly. He's not looking at Bucky. Bucky turns, his vision blurry and his mind screaming, but there's a cold moment of clarity when he turns and sees Peter, behind him, arms raised, web-shooters aimed and ready to fire.

But his face is all wrong. Almost blank. His eyes are wide, but not in fear.

Red soaks into the dark blue material of Peter's shirt, soaking his entire stomach.

And then Bucky's screaming.

He runs, doesn't make it in time before Peter hits the ground. Peter gasps for breath, his hands tightly fisted in the blood-soaked cotton of his shirt, a desperate, fearful whine leaving his lips as everything starts turning *red red red red,* his hands, his clothes, the grass he's lying on.

"Peter," Bucky says, broken and frantic, pulling Peter into his arms, flinching when he cries out in pain. "Oh God, no, no, Peter, let me see—" His head is pounding, he can't think, and there's no time. There's so much blood. It's too much. *This is too much blood.* "Move your hands, I've got you, let me see—"

Peter sobs loudly as Bucky tries to lift him. He's tense with pain and fear in his arms, but all Bucky can focus on is that *red.* He presses his hand to the wound, but it's gone through. There's an exit wound. It's bleeding too much, he has to stop it *now.*

Bucky wraps his arms tightly around the boy, sobbing at the scream of pain that leaves Peter's lips. "D-*Dad,*" he sobs, teeth clenching around a desperate whine as Bucky tries to cover both his wounds to stem the blood.

And then there's an exhale, the smallest, weakest breath. Bucky doesn't even think he would've heard it if he didn't have Peter's face pressed against his bicep, cradled in his arms. He looks up at the boy's face, but Peter's eyes are closed. His limbs go loose. He slumps like dead weight in his lap.

"Peter," Bucky says, urgently. He needs to wake him up. He can't sleep right now, they have to stop the bleeding. "Peter, kiddo, wake up. C'mon."

He cups the boy's face with his left hand, tries to gently shake him awake. Peter doesn't move, but that's not what makes Bucky scream. His fingertips brush against the boy's throat as he holds his head up, and through the metal of his hand, he feels it.

There's no pulse.

*No.*

Bucky lowers his head to the boy's chest, hugs him so tightly he can feel his bones creak from the pressure. The side of his face presses hard against his chest, and then Bucky's sobbing, open and guttural and so loud it makes his own ears ring. There's no heartbeat. He hears himself begging, echoing off the empty field and the empty lake and the empty world all around him. "No, no—don't do this to me, Peter, don't do this—" He can't breathe. He can't feel anything but the lifeless weight in his arms. "*Please,* please don't do this to me, Peter. God. Please God, please, *no.*"

A shadow falls over them, Zemo standing behind him and blocking out the sun.

He almost sounds remorseful.

"*Freight car.*"

And everything goes white.

# Hollowed Out

Chapter Notes

**Angst warning** for this chapter you guys (but it gets better, I promise).

*Mission report: December 16, 1991.*

Bucky wakes up with a stranger's voice echoing in his head. A man's voice, cold and angry, a Sokovian accent clinging to each word, English and Russian alike. It takes him a minute to assign a face to the voice, and with the face comes a name, and the name has him gasping for breath as he jolts awake.

Everything is confusing, at first. Bucky doesn't know where he is or why his chest feels like someone hollowed it out, leaving an aching void where his heart, lungs and stomach used to be. His head throbs nearly as badly, but not quite. And he's shaking. His whole body is trembling to the point that it's more worrisome than annoying.

Between the wetness welling up in his eyes and the piercing headache, he can't focus on his surroundings long enough to figure out where he is. He knows he isn't at home, but not much more than that. He doesn't remember anything, until pieces slowly come back to him in flashes, just a little at a time. But they bring more questions than answers.

When the throbbing in his head starts to subside somewhat, he blinks his eyes open, takes in the small, open cell that makes his skin go numb from the horrifying familiarity. His back is resting against the only solid wall; the other three and the ceiling all barred like a jail cell.

He recognizes the lab that makes up the rest of the room; the operating table that looks like it hasn't been touched in years, everything abandoned, the lights overhead that are burnt out, all except one. Bucky swallows the terrified lump in his throat, not sure how they brought him back to Siberia, or why.

And then he looks down at himself and sees the red.

He remembers that it isn't his blood before he remembers how he knows that.

A word pops into his head, innocuously, offered up like his subconscious whispered it into the soundless vacuum of his mind. *Hysteric.* That's really the only word to describe what happens next —how he can be so still and quiet that even his breaths are silent to his heightened ears one moment, and the next, sobbing so hard that his vision is blurred.

He's tormented by flashes of tall grass swaying in the breeze, an open field, a blue sky blanketing an even bluer lake. Now that he's fully awake, the memory seems determined to return to him despite how badly Bucky wants to block it out. He knows it's the worst thing. He may not know why, but it must be, because his legs haven't stopped shaking even in the moments where his panic is so severe that he feels calm.

There's Zemo's face and his heavy-accent voice speaking to him in cold Russian, the loud *pop* of a silenced gun echoing off mountains all around them. It feels like a memory from a hundred years

ago. He doesn't know how much time has passed, wonders numbly if they put him back in his cryo-pod. It's a dark, terrifying thought; he prays with every fiber of his being that that's not what happened. Missing out on his own life was hard enough, but missing out on Peter's—

Bucky's mouth opens on a gasp that dies in the air, and then he's clawing at his head, the memory forced in like a battering ram and blotting everything else out, until all he can see is the *red,* Peter's body going limp, his son dead in his arms. "No, God, oh God no, *no.*" He can't stop begging despite the all-consuming uselessness that overwhelms him. He's too late. He doesn't even know how too late he is, but what does it matter; whether it's seconds or years, it's the same thing.

"Please," he sobs, knees drawn to his chest and his hands fisted, tense and angry, in the hair falling in front of his eyes. *Not this,* he begs, fingers digging into his skin like he's trying to claw the memory out. *Anything but this. Anything. Anything.*

Folding in on himself, Bucky presses his face between his knees until he's curled into a ball, crazed with panic. It's his fault. In the end it wasn't even Hydra, or the trigger words Zemo had stolen. It wasn't Bucky's previous life as an assassin catching up with him. It wasn't the skeletons in his closet. It was just him, failing Peter the way he's failed every other person who has ever depended on him. He knew this would happen, eventually. But he did it anyway.

Bucky forces himself to take a series of deep breaths, gulping the air down like he just resurfaced from under water. He can feel blood and bruises forming where his fingers are digging viciously into his legs, but hardly registers the pain. It's all gone. Everything they had. Bled out in that field and died in his arms.

He should never have laid eyes on Peter Parker. He never prevented him from getting shot, he only delayed it. Maybe it was just one of those things that was fated to happen no matter what he did, but Bucky knows that isn't true, doesn't let himself take any comfort from the thought that Peter was just doomed from the start. This isn't anyone or anything's fault but his own.

A soft, persistent rattle reaches his ears and makes Bucky lift his head, straining to see where the sound is coming from through the bars of his cramped cell. It gets louder, a continuous and metallic hum that maintains its rhythm until Orbie rolls into view and comes to a stop in front of the door to Bucky's cell, beeping at him happily. Bucky's mouth falls open in disbelief, then twists into a snarl as he's consumed by white-hot fury. "*You.*"

Like a viper, Bucky snatches the robot off the floor lightning fast, gripping it tightly between both hands as he glares down at it hatefully. He never should have laid eyes on Peter. But Orbie's the one who sent that bullet flying. "You did this."

His grip tightens, and Orbie lets out a loud, screeching beep, its outer shell warping beneath his metal hand as he crushes it. "This is your fault. It's *your fault.*" His fingers leave deep, sharp dents in the side of Orbie's face but he doesn't stop, not until the wail of distressed beeping devolves into quieter, sob-like chirps that sound way too pained and childlike for Bucky to ignore, even in his rage.

He drops Orbie's half-mangled body unceremoniously onto the cold floor, breathing hard through the inexplicable sobs that are battling to escape his throat.

Orbie teeters from side to side trying to keep its balance after being dropped, deep holes in the outer shell of its body where Bucky's fingers pierced too far, exposing the vulnerable circuitry inside. One of the round camera lenses has popped from its socket, sagging loosely on Orbie's face, making Bucky feel sick with guilt.

Peter had given him this—had made it for him, to protect him, to keep him safe. Hours and hours of frustration and excitement and anxiety and *love* had been poured into making it for him, and here he is, destroying the last thing his son had ever given him. Peter would be heartbroken.

But he's gone.

"I'm sorry," Bucky sobs, hot tears running down his cheeks and puddling on the cement floor. Through the bars, Orbie beeps at him, a garbled, grieving whine. "Oh God, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry. Peter…"

The sobs shake him to his very core, he doesn't think he can ever stop. He's ruined it, everything. Ruined the last gift Peter would ever give him, after failing to protect him like he promised he would. It's not Orbie's fault, it's his, for not doing the right thing the day they met, for letting Zemo take him, for leaving Peter to die in that field.

Bucky grits his teeth, his jaw creaking from the force of it. It's his fault. But it's not *just* his fault. It's Zemo's, too. And whether he brought Bucky here to imprison or kill him doesn't matter anymore.

Because Bucky's going to kill him first.

He pushes himself to his feet and grabs one of the bars with his left hand, wrenching on it as hard as he can to bend the metal. It feels familiar, trying to escape from this pen, like something he's tried to do so many times he's committed it to muscle memory. It would explain why the bars are so heavily reinforced, how hard it is to distort them, even with his vibranium arm.

When trying to pull the bars apart fails, Bucky leans back and begins to pummel them, filling the room with the horrible ruckus of metal striking metal, like a smith hammering on an anvil. He showers the door to the cell in a barrage of brutal punches, teeth bared and eyes narrowed into slits as he vents every shred of his helplessness and boiling rage. He's going to do the same thing to Zemo when he gets his hands on him. He's not the only one who knows how to hunt someone down.

His assault is momentarily halted when Orbie whines at him, loud and sharp to grab his attention. Bucky pauses mid-punch, face damp with sweat and red with anger, panting from the exertion and arm raised, prepared to strike yet again.

The plates of Orbie's outer shell make a terrible screech, scraping together brokenly from the dents Bucky left in them as they move. They peel back like they did when Peter showed him its inner display screen, and Bucky watches, his expression falling to one of dumb shock as Orbie reveals a set of bronze keys resting inside its body. It rolls upside down, pouring the keys onto the floor, then rolls upright again and gives Bucky a mangled, hopeful chirp.

Guilt pierces him from the inside like a geyser, violent and abrupt and completely destructive, shooting up from his stomach and crowding the inside of his throat, until it's hard to breathe. He says nothing as he bends down and picks up the keys, but the first thing he does once he's figured out which one unlocks his cell and the door is open is pick Orbie up and let it encase his left arm.

The dents and warps in its outer shell are apparent around his hand and wrist, creating sharp ridges and jagged edges where it should be smooth and perfectly flat, but Bucky's oddly at peace with it. *Good,* he thinks, glancing over the blade-like shards of metal covering his knuckles and the backs of his fingers. *That's gonna hurt.*

A chilling calmness falls over him, his eyes blazing but the rest of his face neutral and cold. It's a

state of mind he's never experienced as himself; the Winter Soldier's default emotion, no thought at all except completing the mission laid out before him. It would have scared him, before, to know that he's capable of being the Winter Soldier, like slipping on an old jacket. But Bucky doubts anything will ever be able to truly scare him again.

He heads out of the lab, to the containment room where the others are kept. He's not entirely sure why Zemo brought him here—or more accurately, had *Bucky* bring them here—but considering the fact that he's still alive, it's a pretty safe bet that the other Winter Soldiers are what the man is really after.

It makes no difference now, either way. Steve and Tony and the rest of the Avengers can handle that part. All Bucky cares about is getting his hands on Zemo, and if it kills him, at the very least, he's taking Zemo with him.

His body moves silently on its own, no cognizant thought necessary at all, just one quiet foot in front of the other, moving through the base like a shadow, a ghost neither seen nor heard. He doesn't need to actively think about where he's going. He doesn't need to actively think about anything, anymore.

But as he reaches the end of the hallway that he knows leads to the cryo-pods, he hears voices—not the ones he was expecting, cold, robotic Russian in clipped, obedient tones, no—he hears Zemo's heavy Sokovian accent, and another, one even more familiar.

"So this was your plan?" T'Challa asks, defusing some of the murderous rage festering inside of Bucky. He peeks around the corner and goes numb at what he sees. Each of the cryo-pods has been shot, a bullet in the brain of each of the other Soldiers. Bucky stares in utter confusion before trailing his eyes to the two men.

Zemo is on the ground, half sitting up and half lying down, cornered against the dais in the center of the room. His face is badly bruised, and he's holding a hand against a deep wound in his side. T'Challa stands over him, in his Black Panther suit but holding his mask, a very large and very old-looking laptop gripped tightly in his other hand. "To lure them here so you could tear them apart?"

"They were going to do the tearing," Zemo says, hissing in pain and clutching his side harder. "I was only going to provide the motivation."

T'Challa glares down at him, anger and grief evident on his face, even from the other side of the room. "I almost killed the wrong man."

Zemo scoffs. "Hardly an innocent one."

Bucky flinches almost as hard as Zemo does when T'Challa smashes the laptop on the ground in front of him, not looking away from the other man's eyes as he brings his foot down hard on the back of it, splintering it into hundreds and hundreds of pieces. Zemo stares at the wreckage of the device with a cold, defeated expression, before lifting his gaze to give T'Challa a defiant look.

"You have failed," T'Challa says. "You are going to tell me where Barnes is, and then you are going to answer for your crimes."

"No."

Both men turn their heads to look at him as Bucky steps into the room, out of the shadows. T'Challa seems relieved, for a moment, before he gives Bucky a look that almost feels like he's staring into his very soul. "Bucky—"

“He’s not answering to you,” Bucky says, his voice like ice, sharp and cold. “He’s answering to *me.*”

To his credit, Zemo doesn’t shrink under the weight of Bucky’s glare. There’s a level of dulled acceptance in his eyes, a hopelessness Bucky’s surprised to see in someone other than himself.

T’Challa’s face hardens into a firm look, and he lifts a hand, stopping Bucky from coming any closer. “I told you before, this is *my* mission—”

“I don’t give a shit about your mission,” Bucky snaps, too angry, coiled too tightly with rage to focus on anything but the man lying only a few feet away from him. He doesn’t feel the tears until they’re welling up in his eyes, can’t feel anything except the blinding, deafening *hate.* “He killed my son.”

He sees T’Challa falter, and momentarily tears his gaze away from Zemo’s face to watch as T’Challa’s hard, determined expression slips beneath a current of confused shock. T’Challa stares at him, takes in Bucky’s tense, furious posture, the busted metal of Orbie’s body wrapped his left hand, the tears running down his face, and the near-black stain of dried blood soaked into his shirt and pants. He sees the moment disbelief turns to horror on the man’s face, and Bucky is forced to look away, the grief compelling him to sink to his knees.

“Is your revenge so important to you,” T’Challa whispers through clenched teeth, sounding surprisingly close to tears himself, “that you could justify this?”

It takes Bucky a moment to realize T’Challa isn’t talking to him. He watches Zemo raise his other hand—the one not pressed against the wound in his side—revealing a small, old flip phone, which he holds to his chest, protectively. “I’m as sorry about the boy as I am about your father,” Zemo says, then looks back at Bucky, his eyes narrowing. “Though, I’m not the reason that bullet hit him.”

Bucky moves before any of them realize it, even himself. He’s just suddenly *on* Zemo, pinning him to the dais with his right hand wrapped around his throat, pummeling him brutally with his left. There are no words, just a furious, guttural scream as he brings his fist down again and again, too angry to even take satisfaction in the way Orbie’s sharp edges cut and mutilate the man’s face. Bucky doesn’t think. There’s no righteous speech, no cry of, *this is for killing my son,* no gratification of any kind. He has nothing to say. He just wants Zemo *dead.*

“*Enough!”*

He snarls like an aggressive dog when T’Challa grabs him by his metal arm and pulls him back, yanking him to his feet. Bucky turns to shove the man off, but T’Challa grabs him by the collar of his shirt and holds him firm, forcing Bucky to look at him and refusing to let go. “You will kill him!”

“I *am,*” Bucky seethes, mirroring T’Challa and fisting his hand in the hard material of his Black Panther suit, keeping him at arm’s length. “I am, I’m gonna kill him. Get *off.*”

“This is not you,” T’Challa says, so firmly that it gives Bucky pause. T’Challa gazes at him imploringly, but sincerely, staring into his eyes and actually *seeing.* “This is not the man you are, Bucky. You know that.” Bucky shakes his head, his face soaked, in both his own tears and Zemo’s blood. “Don’t dishonor your son’s memory by killing in his name.”

Bucky goes utterly still.

His son's memory.

That's all that's left of him, now.

T'Challa cautiously lets him go, and Bucky turns away from both of them, forcing air into his lungs manually, in and out, in and out. He wants to scream, can feel it resting at the back of his throat. But he knows if he lets it out now he'll never stop, just scream and scream until no other sound exists.

"There are other parents without children because of him," T'Challa says. "And there are children without parents. The living are not done with him yet, and they are owed justice as much as you and I." He places a hand on Bucky's shoulder, a reassuring gesture, but Bucky's gone numb, even the man's voice seems terribly far away. "He *will* pay for what he's done, Bucky. But not like this."

"It doesn't matter," Bucky says. He's empty all the way inside, no idea how he's still standing on his feet. He's been hollowed out, his knees shake as his legs try to keep him upright. It doesn't matter, not a damn thing. He's not a dad anymore. No one's ever going to call him that again.

Behind him, T'Challa politely turns away to give him a moment of privacy, bending down to bind Zemo's hands before pulling his unconscious body off the floor. He throws him like dead weight over his shoulder, then gently squeezes Bucky's shoulder again, comforting. "Come on. I will take you home."

*Where's that?* he wants to ask, but instead he nods, turning and following the other man through the base.

As they reach the long stretch of hallway leading to the exit, a loud, thundering rumble shakes the earth, forcing both of them to brace their hands against the wall to keep their balance. The rumble steadily fades, and the two look at each other, recognizing the engine of a plane.

"Did he call for back-up?"

"No," T'Challa says. "From what he told me, this was a personal mission. But *I* sent word to Stark and Captain Rogers when I pursued him here." He turns and gives Bucky a remorseful look, dolor clear in his dark eyes. "I'm sorry, I would have told them about—but I didn't know—"

"It's not your fault," Bucky says, because it isn't. It's nobody's but his.

T'Challa looks like he wants to refute him in some way, but he seems to shelve that thought for the moment and continues toward the exit, Zemo still unconscious over his shoulder. Bucky follows, numb even before the biting Siberian wind hits his body, his stomach churning with unmistakable fear when he sees the Quinjet parked beside T'Challa's plane, terrified of what Steve and Tony will say when they step outside and see Bucky soaked in Peter's blood.

But the door to the plane opens, and it's not Steve or Tony who comes running out of it.

It's Spider-Man.

"Dad!" Peter shouts, almost tripping through the deep snow, but still rushing forward as fast as he can. "*Dad!"*

Bucky doesn't breathe, doesn't make any sound. He runs past T'Challa and drops to his knees, Peter throwing himself into his arms and latching on to his body with what feels like every ounce of his super-strength.

“Peter—oh my God, oh God, *Peter, Peter*—” He’s aware of how hysterical he sounds, smiling despite how hard he’s suddenly crying, despite the sobs clinging to his every word. “You’re—I don’t—”

He pulls the kid back, grabbing his mask a little too harshly and pulling it off his face, and it’s not a dream, it’s *real,* Peter’s here and he’s alive and he’s okay, and he’s crying so hard that he has frozen tear tracks glued to his cheeks, shivering like a newborn deer, but he’s *okay* and Bucky can’t find it in him to say or do anything except wrap his arms around him so tightly that nothing will ever be able to tear them apart again. “You’re alive, you’re *alive*—”

He’s distantly aware of people around them, in front of and behind them, but in that moment he doesn’t care, not one bit. Peter’s alive. Nothing else matters.

“I thought you were—” Bucky can’t even say it. He pulls him back again so he can see his face, wraps his hand around Peter’s shoulder and presses his thumb against his throat so he can feel his pulse. He can’t bring himself to say *dead,* because even thinking it makes him feel like he’s going to jinx this whole thing, break the inexplicable magic spell that has brought his son back to him. “How—your heart—”

“If I’d gotten there even thirty seconds later, he probably would’ve been toast,” Tony says. Bucky looks up at him over Peter’s head, sees him and Steve standing together, both ready for a fight in their respective Iron Man and Captain America getups. “*Thankfully,* the UN called a couple-day-long recess on our Accords dispute, so we were already on our way home. Kid called us when he figured out something was going on, and I hopped in the suit and damn near broke the sound barrier on my way back.”

Tony lifts his gauntlets, waggling his fingers like he’s showing Bucky something he can’t see.

“It’s a good thing I’ve got a med-kit built into this thing. Took lots of CPR and epinephrine to combat his PEA, but I managed to keep him going long enough for his healing factor to seal up his wounds. One blood transfusion later, and he’s practically good as new. Better, even, in my opinion, now that he’s basically half me.”

Bucky looks back at Peter’s face, like he’s searching for any sign that this isn’t true. It feels too good to be. Tony must have only been seconds behind them, but obviously Zemo was prepared.

There are so many things he wants to say, things he thought he would never get the chance to say again. But Peter is shaking under the harsh wind, probably only held up by the knee-high snow, so Bucky stands and takes him under his arm to start guiding him back toward the plane.

Steve reaches out to him as they walk past, and Bucky stops, lets him rest a hand on his shoulder, cupping the side of his neck. Bucky returns the gesture, not quite a hug, gazing into Steve’s worried eyes for a moment but acutely aware of his freezing son trembling under his arm. “You’re all right,” Steve says, almost a question. Bucky simply nods. He’s pretty sure his hair’s gone white by now, but he’s still too overwhelmed by his immense relief to feel anything else, besides exhaustion.

With a nod and an affectionate squeeze of his hand, Steve lets him go, turning back to T’Challa with a more serious expression.

Bucky leaves them to it. He doubts T’Challa will hand Zemo over to Steve and Tony, but he doesn’t care anymore either way. He no longer has any right to demand justice from the man, but there are still dozens of people out there who do. They can handle the rest.

He takes Peter back to the Quinjet and into the cockpit, where it's warmest. Peter is still trembling from the wind chill as Bucky sits him down on a seat and kneels in front of him, the boy's teeth chattering so hard, it's no surprise he's hardly said a word. Now that he's looking at him closely, Bucky sees that Peter's eyes are half-lidded, like he's fighting to keep them open. His slumping posture is proof of how exhausted he must be; he looks as dog-tired as Bucky feels.

Peter leans into his hand as Bucky wipes the lingering trail of tears off his cheeks, then pulls back, eyeing his metal arm critically. He gently grabs Bucky's wrist and holds his hand still, a frown crossing his tired face. "What happened to Orbie?"

Guilt buries him like an avalanche. Bucky resists the urge to duck his head, owing it to Peter to tell him the truth, but light-headed at the thought of him knowing what he's done. He swallows the painful lump in his throat and gently squeezes Peter's shoulder with his other hand. "I'm sorry, Peter," he says, softly. "I was just—I was out of my mind with grief. I thought you were—"

The heartbroken look Peter gives him makes Bucky glad he's already kneeling down, because it makes him feel so sick to his stomach that his legs turn to jelly. Peter looks away, pressing their palms together and pulling his hand back so that Orbie can re-form between them, then holds him still between both hands so he can inspect the full extent of the damages.

Orbie whines pitifully, the sound broken and garbled where Bucky's fingers had crushed the ear-speakers on the side of its face. Peter pets the top of its head, soothingly, and gives Bucky a weak smile. "It's okay. I can fix him."

"I'm more worried about you than the robot," Bucky says, brushing the boy's bangs out of his forehead. "How long have I been gone? T'Challa made it sound like he was right behind us, but you're already back on your feet. How many days has it been?"

"Um, it's been, like," Peter makes a face like he's counting inside his head, his brows furrowing. "Twelve hours? No, sorry, thirteen. Stupid time change is messing me up."

Bucky stares, his mouth sliding open as he tries to find the words he wants to say. But all that comes out is an angry and incredulous, "I'm sorry, twelve *hours?"*

"Thirteen—"

"You better not be serious Peter," he says, his sharp tone making the boy's mouth snap shut. "You're not serious, are you? Are you honestly telling me that you jumped on a plane to *Siberia* a few *hours* after you almost bled to death? That's not what I'm hearing, is it?"

Peter hunches his shoulders, defensive. "I had to, Dad, he kidnapped you! I had to come save you!"

"Why the hell did Steve agree to this?" Bucky snaps, half a mind to march right out of this plane and wring both his and Tony's necks. "No, Peter, this is *not* okay. Your healing factor might be impressive, but there's no way it's fully healed a wound like that so quickly."

Peter crosses his arms over his chest, but Bucky can see that the movement is careful, deliberate. He's in pain. God fucking damn it. "Dad, seriously, I'm *fine*."

"Show me," he says, seething, his hand moving from Peter's shoulder to the emblem of his Spider-Man suit. Peter winces when he presses down on it to make the suit go lax, and Bucky apologetically runs his hand through the boy's hair, the other gently easing the top of the suit down his shoulders to inspect the wound. There are miles of white bandages wrapped around his midsection, and Bucky peels them back slowly, mindful of the tense expression on Peter's face.

Terror and rage has Bucky biting back the urge to snap when he removes the last of the bandages and sees the very obviously *not healed* bullet wound below his ribcage. There's a mark higher up, where Bucky guesses Tony administered the epinephrine, but it's already too healed over to tell for sure. The bullet wound, however, is swollen and purple, a gigantic bloody bruise that looks like absolute agony.

No wonder Peter can hardly keep his eyes open and has barely said a word. He probably hasn't even recovered from his blood transfusion, much less from being *fucking shot.* And Bucky seriously doubts the exit wound on his back is in much better shape.

Peter shrinks under his gaze, shivering, and Bucky re-bandages his wound and helps him pull the suit back up to his collar wordlessly. He's murderously angry, at Steve, at Tony, at Peter for being so goddamn reckless, but he keeps his mouth shut to stop himself from saying something he'll regret. The last thing he wants to do after finding out his son is alive is yell at him.

But Peter looks like he'd prefer yelling over Bucky's angry silence, and he looks up at him nervously and assures, "I mean it, Dad, really, I'm okay. I rested the whole plane ride here, Steve made me lie down the whole time and everything. I feel fine—"

"You *died,*" Bucky hisses, coldly, trying so hard to keep the anger at bay but at the absolute end of his rope. "Do you understand that, Peter? You aren't *fine.* A few hours ago, you were *dead.*"

"Only clinically!" Peter argues, more defiantly than he's spoken back to Bucky in longer than he can remember. "And only for like, a second! Dad, look, I know you're worried about me, but I'm literally healing more and more every minute. It was kind of serious, but now it's okay! *I'm* okay!"

"*This* isn't okay, Peter!" Bucky says, gesturing to the boy's chest, where his wound is undoubtedly throbbing like mad just from him sitting upright. "What were you thinking? If I was still—if that guy had been waiting for you with an entire *team* of Winter Soldiers, what were you planning on doing? You can't fight like this. You could hardly *stand* out there. How many goddamn times do we have to go over this? This recklessness *has to stop.* You're smarter than this, I don't understand why you—"

"You're right, you *don't* understand," Peter agrees, looking equal parts mortified from being scolded and stubborn about holding his ground. He's recoiled slightly in that very small way of his, but his expression is unflinchingly obstinate, not wanting to fight, but refusing to back down. "I couldn't just stay home, Dad. If somebody took me away from you, would *you* stay put just because you got shot?"

Bucky squeezes his son's shoulders tightly in his hands. "He almost *did* take you away from me, Peter."

"But you would've come after us, right? Even if you were hurt?"

"Of course I would have, you're my *kid*—"

"And you're my dad!" Peter says, stubbornly, his tone begging Bucky to finally *get it.* "That's my point! We're family and we protect each other, even if it's risky sometimes. You would do the same for me, so it's not fair for you to say that *I* have to put myself first when *you* never would."

"I am the adult, *you* are the child. It's my responsibility to put you first, Peter. That's how it works."

"Well it's *dumb,*" Peter says, a little petulantly. It's an uncharacteristically childish thing to hear

him say, but he says it so earnestly that Bucky actually finds himself trying to suppress a small smile, despite everything.

Peter looks like he wants to keep arguing, but the determined, defensive look on his face has steadily drained away throughout this whole conversation, and Bucky realizes guiltily that if he didn't still have his hands tightly gripping Peter's shoulders, he probably would have slumped over by now, his healing factor burdening him with intense exhaustion as it works its magic.

Sighing, Bucky takes the seat beside him and pulls Peter into his side, the kid folding against him bonelessly. "We'll talk about it more later," he says, holding Peter against him with his metal arm, brushing the boy's hair out of his face with the other. "Get some rest."

Peter relaxes against him without complaint, giving him a small affirmation that could barely be described as a hum. Bucky's not surprised by just how fast Peter slips under, given the extent of his wounds, but it does make his nerves feel painfully exposed in a vicious, primal way. He pushes the stress and anxiety down and gently moves Peter until his head is resting in his lap, then forces himself to breathe slow and steady, not taking his eyes from Peter's pale—yet peaceful—sleeping face.

His own exhaustion begs him to surrender to the need for sleep as well, especially when Steve and Tony return and Steve takes the seat beside him, running his hand along Bucky's back, firm and comforting. But Bucky fights the urge, too wired and anxious to let Peter out of his sight, remaining silent and tense the entire way home.

T'Challa doesn't follow them back to the states, which doesn't surprise Bucky in the slightest. He probably wants to get Zemo secured and locked away as quickly as possible, after these last few days of tirelessly hunting him down. Bucky thinks about calling him in the next few days, to thank him, or even just to check up on him, but the idea is muted and far away as he helps Peter out of the car when they pull up in front of the mansion.

It's almost noon by the time they get home, but after nearly twenty hours of nonstop plane travel, the four of them are so tired that it feels like midnight. Tony collapses dramatically onto one of the couches, but Steve lingers behind Bucky and Peter as Bucky leads them to Peter's room.

It's a testament to how tired Peter is that he doesn't complain about being sent to bed. He crawls under the covers obediently when Bucky lifts them, still sluggish from all the stress his body's been under in the last twenty-four hours. Peter sets Orbie's broken body beside him, then lets his eyes flutter shut. He's dozing before Bucky can even finish laying the blankets back over him.

Bucky sits and watches the even rise and fall of Peter's chest for a long time. He can feel Steve waiting in the doorway behind him, patiently, but clearly not going anywhere. With a defeated sigh, Bucky gently kisses Peter's forehead and stands, nodding when Steve gestures for him to follow him out of the room. Bucky leaves Peter's bedroom door open as he does. He knows Friday would tell them if anything came up, but it settles the anxiety raging in his stomach, just a little.

In the hallway, Steve takes him by the shoulders and pulls him into a hug, arms warm and tight around his neck. "I'm so glad you're okay," he says. Bucky's body sags almost of its own will, hugging Steve tight around the waist and squeezing, his face buried in the man's shoulder. "I'm sorry we weren't there, Buck."

He's still angry. He's so goddamn angry, it feels like all his muscles have turned to stone. But the

four of them made it out of this nightmare alive, and part of him desperately wants to not waste a single moment of this second chance by giving in to his rage.

When they pull apart, Steve takes him to the living room where Tony is waiting, looking slightly less exhausted than he did when they arrived home. Steve follows Tony's lead and sprawls out on the opposite sofa, beckoning for Bucky to join him, but Bucky stays standing.

"How could you let him get on that plane?"

Tony and Steve look at each other. Steve seems to deliberate on his answer, his brows creased with tension, so Tony unhelpfully replies, "Well, it's not like we could just leave him alone."

He fixes Tony with a cold, hard look and asks, "So why didn't one of you stay?"

"Because Steve was losing his shit and was frankly in no condition to fly himself to Siberia," Tony says bluntly. "We didn't know where you guys were going, we were just following Orbie's tracker. This seemed like more than a two-man operation, but we didn't *have* anybody else to send, Bucky. It's just us."

Glaring, Bucky holds his ground, his body pulled tight like a bowstring. "Even if you had to leave Peter by himself—"

"How? What'd you want us to do, strap him to his bed?" The flippant tone in the man's voice shifts, then, and he gives Bucky a slightly more sympathetic look, seeming almost regretful. "I'm telling you, he wasn't having it. The kid was so worked up he was making his injuries worse. The only way to even get him to calm down enough to bandage him up was by letting him on the Quinjet."

Before he can say anything, Steve sits up straighter and gently says, "I know you're worried, Buck, but we were there with him, we had a plan—"

"I don't care if your entire team was there with him," Bucky snaps, not meaning to sound so harsh, but the anger sends each word erupting from him like a volcano, against his will. "You could have been taking him into a *warzone,* and with his injuries—"

"Peter's a lot more resilient than you give him credit for," Tony cuts in. His eyes have hardened, dark like he's bracing himself for a fight. If Bucky didn't know any better, he'd think the man looks insulted. "I know you're a big overprotective worrywart, but Peter is *not* a child, Bucky. He'd probably be one of the strongest Avengers on the team if he joined. You're being unreasonable."

"*Unreasonable?"* Bucky repeats, his voice rising, though he doesn't mean for it to. He needs to keep it down, he doesn't want Peter to wake up to this, but he's so painfully terrified that the words pour out of him all on their own. "For God's sake, Stark," he raises his hand, holds his palm toward the floor just below his heart, "he's *this big!"*

Tony's reply is loud and sharp enough to match his own. "And whose fault is that?"

Bucky flinches. Confusion floods out the hostility inside of him and washes it away. He watches the angry look on Tony's face dissolve almost instantly, like the words have just caught up with him, like they've shocked him as much as they shocked Bucky. "Shit," he says, lifting a hand like he's trying to stop Bucky from replying. "No, I—sorry. That didn't—it's not your fault. That came out wrong."

When he finds his voice again, there isn't a hint of anger left in it. "What do you mean, 'whose

fault'?"

"Nothing," Tony says immediately. His gaze is so apologetic it's almost sickening. "It's not really anyone's fault, I just—"

He can't hold the thought back when it pops into his head. "Are you saying I stunted his growth?"

"Not intentionally," Tony grimaces. "Look, I'm sorry, okay? That was uncalled for. You had no way of knowing." The distraught look on his face must be apparent, because Tony starts frantically rambling, "I don't think Peter knew what he was doing either, he was just, y'know, still getting used to living with you and trying to live within your means. That's not your fault."

Bucky almost stumbles back on his feet, his body suddenly painfully heavy. "The food," he says, realizing. "That's why you've been so stubborn about getting him to eat."

Tony's quiet for a moment, just gazing at him with the same sickeningly apologetic look, face pale with regret. "Peter's metabolism is incredible," he finally says, like he's choosing his words carefully. "But there's a downside. It takes a crazy amount of calories to maintain muscle mass, let alone encourage actual growth. I think the only reason he even grew at all is because he's at that age where his body's determined to go through a growth spurt, but if he was eating enough to maintain his mass *and* actually grow, he'd probably be a normal height."

Bucky sinks down. If there hadn't been a chair behind him, he would have hit the floor, his legs giving out beneath his weight. "Why didn't he tell me? If he was hungry, I would've—"

"Remember when we talked about him having abandonment issues?" Tony asks, stronger now. "This is part of that. He was scared you'd think he was a burden if he caused you too much trouble. He would rather go hungry than risk you walking out on him."

"I'd never—"

"We *know,* Bucky. You know it, we know it, everybody who's ever seen you two together for five seconds knows it." He leans forward, their gazes locked together. Bucky wants to turn away from the sincerity in the other man's eyes, but he can't move. "But that's what trauma and depression and anxiety do. This isn't on you, it's not even on Peter. And personally, I don't think we're too late to rectify this, either. Bet you fifty bucks that after a couple months of high-caloric intake, Peter will sprout up like a daisy."

Tony smiles a little, an attempt to lighten the mood, but Bucky doesn't laugh. His chest feels like a block of solid ice, biting and suffocating. Peter had starved himself to stay with him, and Bucky never even noticed. Worse—he made jokes about what a bottomless pit the boy could be, with no idea that Peter was really hurting himself all along. The failure capsizes him, Bucky realizes with only distant and dim horror that he's drowning.

Steve clears his throat, sitting up a little straighter and turning to face him, one hand reaching out and resting gently on his knee. "I'm sorry for letting him come with us, Buck," he says, unwavering yet soft. "You're right, it was dangerous. You told me from the beginning that you wanted Peter's wellbeing to come first, and I made yours priority one instead. I'm sorry." Steve's face cracks a little, and Bucky looks up at him and feels a distinct swell of panic at the way his lips are quivering. "I just… I know what losing you feels like. And I looked at his terrified little face and couldn't stand the thought of coming back here and telling him you were gone." When he looks back up at Bucky, his eyes are wet. Bucky's stomach flips alarmingly. "I didn't want him to have to bury anyone else."

Bucky bolts to his feet, he can't stand it. He turns and heads for the hall, ignoring the two of them as they call after him. He can't listen to either of them speak for one more minute.

Guilt has become more familiar to him over the last seventy years than Steve ever was, but *this* —this panicked, overwhelming sensation of having the ground ripped out from underneath him— this is new. It's a guilt so mind-numbingly powerful that he feels like the ground is about to swallow him. He can't bear to sit there one more minute and listen to Steve and Tony ramble on about how much Peter loves him, not now, when he's been forced to realize that he hasn't done a single thing right by him since the very day they met.

He doesn't turn to look through Peter's open door as he walks through his own, shutting and locking it behind him.

# Moving Forward

"Bucky. Peter is requesting that I unlock the door."

Friday's voice pulls him from a fitful and restless sleep what feels like an eternity later. It takes him a moment to get his bearings. His body aches with a familiar, ancient stiffness and he realizes, grouchily, that he fell asleep on the floor, sitting beside his bed with his head tipped back against the mattress.

He grunts when Friday repeats herself, and forces out a sleep-heavy, "Fine," that grates his own ears. He only manages to pull himself up enough to actually sit *on* the bed when his door is pushed open. Light streams into his dark room and makes him suddenly aware of how late it must be.

"Dad?"

Bucky blinks at Peter's silhouette standing in the doorway. If it was anyone else, he probably wouldn't notice the slight lean in the boy's posture, how he's subtly pressing his shoulder against the doorjamb, letting it take his weight, his arm crossing his chest to keep anything from touching it. The color in his face is better, but the pain he's in is still so obvious. "Um. I was wondering, do you wanna watch a movie? Or play something, maybe?"

Bucky's stomach twists like someone's trying to wring it out. The taste of bile rises in the back of his throat. "You should be in bed," he says, trying not to notice the way Peter's expression falls.

"Oh." Peter shifts his weight from one foot to the other, grimaces, and shifts it back. "Well, there's —there's a TV in my room? We could watch Netflix? Or, um, bring in a board game or something, or one of Mr. Stark's gaming consoles—"

"You need to rest," Bucky insists. Then, when the hurt look on Peter's face makes his throat close up, adds, "Sorry, kiddo, it's just… not tonight."

"Okay." Peter gives him a weak, slightly-forced smile and steps back into the hallway. "G'night, Dad."

Bucky doesn't say it back, just drops his face into his hands after Peter has pulled his door shut and begun to walk away.

Now that he's aware of it, it's all he can see. How could he not have known, his own son? There's no excuse, not when he and Peter spent the last year living in one room together, sleeping five feet apart, sharing every meal. Peter is the most open and honest person Bucky's ever met—he's told Bucky *everything,* big and little things alike—and still he didn't know the boy was starving himself just to stay with him.

He presses his forehead into the hard shell of his kneecap, his eyes falling shut. A horrible, intrusive thought floods into his mind, as forceful and booming as a battering ram. He was never the father he wanted to be. He was just the first person Peter met after his aunt and uncle died who didn't neglect or abuse him. That was apparently all it took, a home worth starving for. Any hint of pride or triumph he gained from that identity has been washed away in the stream of guilt cutting through him.

And Tony had known, instantly. One look at Peter and he knew about the abandonment issues, about the starving, the depression, the anxiety, all of it. Five minutes together and Tony Stark had every shred of knowledge he needed to be a better father than Bucky could ever hope to be, and the

part that kills him is Peter would've been better off.

A flash of Peter lying in his arms in that field flares in the back of his mind and startles him. He can still feel the warmth spreading over his stomach as Peter bled out, as his blood soaked through his clothes and stained his skin, as real as if it were happening now. He'll never forget that sensation as long as he lives. Half a step away from falling back into the Winter Soldier's mindset and still vividly, acutely aware of his child dying in his arms.

Tears well up in his eyes. It never would have happened if Steve and Tony had been there. It never would have happened if he'd done the right thing and turned Peter away, or taken him to someone else. Frank and Sharon would have taken him if Bucky had asked, but he never did.

It was selfishness, all of it. Selfishness and stupidity. He knew he was good for nothing. He just liked the way Peter made him feel like less of a monster, how it was harder to remember the horrible things he'd done when that kid was smiling at him like that. Peter made him feel human, and Bucky didn't want to lose that. He wanted to be Peter's dad. It was the best name anyone had ever given him.

But he didn't deserve it, and he knew that. That's the worst part, really, having all his doubts collected over the last year poured over him like boiling water. He knew he didn't deserve to be called Peter's dad, and now there's nowhere to hide from that fact.

He swallows the lump in his throat and wills the dampness in his eyes to go with it. A sharp, aching stab of pain spreads through his chest, remembering the first night he came here. If only he could go back in time and agree to Tony's offer, let him take Peter away. Peter would've been heartbroken, but he never would have been shot.

Isn't that what parenthood is supposed to be about? Putting your children's needs before your own? He doesn't know how he could ever have the gall to call himself Peter's dad when he hasn't done a single thing right by him in all the time he's known him.

The sob finally works its way out of his throat, and Bucky lowers his head, defeated. He knows the truth, now, with startling and abundant clarity: since the very first day they met, Peter has never needed him nearly as much as he's needed Peter.

He tramples down on his grief as he listens to the boy's retreating footsteps limping down the hall. Three, then four, then Tony's voice drifts in from outside his room. "Hey, Pete. Thought I heard you get up. You hungry?"

Even through the door, Peter's voice is quieter than it should be. "Oh, um. No thanks, Mr. Stark. I'm okay."

"You sure?" There's an edge to Tony's voice that Bucky can just barely hear, that forced casual tone, an attempt to mask how serious he is. "You haven't eaten anything in quite a while. Your healing factor needs food and rest to work the way it's supposed to, you know."

"Yeah. I'm really not hungry, though."

Something wells up in Bucky that feels foreign to him, then. His body goes taut, and he pushes himself to his feet and wrenches the door open, stepping into the hallway and startling both its occupants. Peter looks relieved, at first, until he sees the look on Bucky's face.

The look of anger.

"*Peter,*" he snaps, cold and sharp. "You need to eat. Get your ass in that kitchen and get some food

into you."

Peter quails at the tone of his voice, completely caught off guard. Bucky's never spoken to him like that, not once. But the anger feels like a cooling balm—chases the guilt and self-loathing away, for a painful, brief moment—so when Peter opens his mouth and says, "But… I'm not—" Bucky slams his fist into the wall almost hard enough to dent it and seethes, "*Peter Benjamin Parker.* I'm not going to say it again. Kitchen*. Now.*"

The kid takes a step back, then another, then turns and skirts around Tony without looking at him. He heads down the hall, and Bucky watches him go, acutely aware of the way Tony's gaze is boring into him, disbelieving and scornful. "What the *hell* are you—"

"It has nothing to do with you," Bucky says, turning to slam his bedroom door shut before Tony can even respond.

He doesn't sleep anymore that night.

A few hours later, Peter's soft footsteps come limping back up the hall, pausing outside his door. Bucky sits in the eerie stillness of night and waits, just listening to Peter linger there. But a minute passes, and Peter doesn't knock, just carries himself away from Bucky's door and through his own.

Bucky hates that he feels relieved.

When the sun starts to rise, he emerges from his room and makes himself a cup of coffee. The house is silent, but he's starting to get used to that. He waits to see if Steve will wake up for some of that early-morning exercise he's so fond of and join him, but by the time he's done his cup, there's still no sign of anyone else.

He clears his throat, startled by how loud it is in the empty room. "Friday. How much did Peter eat yesterday?"

"Peter consumed an estimated 1,700 calories yesterday, Bucky."

Even he knows that's way too low. "How much does he need with his metabolism?"

"According to Mr. Stark's research, Peter requires a daily minimum of 4,000 calories to maintain his health, and approximately 6,000 a day to encourage growth, given his current age and below-average height and weight."

Six thousand calories. Peter probably didn't eat that much in *three* days, back in Queens, let alone daily. Only eating 28% of what your body actually needs probably feels damn close to starvation.

Bucky's felt that kind of hunger before. When he thinks of it, the phantom ache flares up in his stomach, a pain so profound it's impossible to forget, ingrained in the very fibers of his muscles. He wouldn't wish it on anyone, not Zemo, not even Rumlow. And yet he spent the last year inflicting it on the person he loves most in all the world.

*Why couldn't I see it?*

But Tony had. It was probably the first thought that popped into his head when he laid eyes on Peter. Took one look at him and saw he was underfed before he saw anything else, the way a *real*

parent would. He may have done his research beforehand, but that didn't mean he *knew* Peter. Not like Bucky knew him.

Or at least, not the way he believed he had.

"Friday," he says, staring down at the coffee stain at the bottom of his cup, "could you do me a favor?"

"I am programmed to help Mr. Stark's guests with whatever they need, Bucky," Friday answers instantly, her tone endlessly patient. A servant who never sleeps.

He would feel guilty, but there's none left to go around. "Would you be able to set reminders for Peter, to make sure he eats? I…" *don't want to yell at him again.* "I think I need some space, for a little while. If you could remind him to eat and how much, and try to get him as close to that 6,000 mark as we can, that would… that would help."

"Of course, Bucky." He has no idea how a robot can sound *motherly,* but Tony somehow found a way. "I will do my best to encourage Peter to ingest a sufficient amount of nutrition daily. Would you like me to inform you if my reminders prove to be unsuccessful?"

Bucky's stomach twists. He thinks back to that moment in the hallway, when he lost it, how Peter had looked at him. He never wants to see that look on the kid's face again, but if Friday tells him to eat, and he *doesn't…*

"Yeah," he sighs, hanging his head in his hands. "I'll take it from there."

He locks himself in his room for the rest of the day, instructing Friday to deflect Peter and Steve as much as possible. He's less worried about Tony—the man hasn't so much as attempted to speak to him since last night—though Bucky doesn't mind. One less person to keep at bay, to shut out until he's got a grip, until the roar of blood in his ears quiets down enough to let him think.

Until he can bear to lay eyes on Peter again.

Whatever Friday tells Peter, thankfully, the boy does his best to listen. Bucky expected him to linger outside his door like a neglected dog, but the kid only knocks twice, first thing in the morning and again in the early afternoon, and blissfully leaves once Friday shoos him away.

Steve is less obedient. He's never been someone who accepts a cold shoulder, not when he feels he's owed something, or more importantly, thinks it's something he can fix. It's a miracle that Bucky can remember how he's always been like that. Didn't matter how big the world's problems were—a hundred years ago, little five-foot-nothing Steven Grant Rogers was out there trying to solve them.

He applies the same tenacity to reaching Bucky now, trying to get through to him, trying to get him to let him in. Bucky would be begrudgingly glad of it if he didn't feel like his skin was about to split down all his seams, something dark and ugly emerging from underneath, spawned of anger and fear. He feels stuck in the Earth's gravitational pull—he can either go up, rising from the broken shell of his current self, a vessel of his own rage and hate and helplessness, or he can sink, let the guilt and the fear drag him down, collapsing in on himself like an old home weathered by too many storms.

He's terrified of what he'll say the next time he sees Peter. Terrified that his anger will spill out of him again, scalding to the touch, when the only person he's truly angry at is himself. There's an ugly, hateful thing deep inside of him that wants to grab Peter by the shoulders, shake some sense into him, screaming, *Why didn't you tell me?* The urge to scream it is lodged in his throat, even now, ready to burst the moment he opens his mouth. *How did I not see it? You tell me that, Peter. Why'd you have to go and hide something so important, from me, of all people? How could you?*

And if he's being honest, more than the anger, there's the fear of what sort of hell his mind will conjure up when he sees Peter's face. The image of his small, trembling body soaked in blood is already projected on the forefront of his mind, looping on repeat like a cheap flick at the Dollar Movie. The way he'd gone lax in his arms when his heart stopped beating. How heavy and light he was at the same time, so small, but dead weight in Bucky's lap.

That was almost the last time Peter ever closed his eyes, and if it had been, it would've been Bucky's fault.

But just after the sun sets, Friday chirps to life above him and says, "Bucky, I am worried Peter will not reach his caloric intake goal for today at his current rate."

All his muscles are stiff from sitting curled up and not moving. His arms and legs unfurl from his body slowly, like an old hose being unwound for the first time in years. "How many times has he eaten?"

"Twice. I am attempting to coax him into having dinner, but he's insistent that he's not hungry." She pauses. Bucky can't help but wonder what *thinking* feels like when you're an AI. Is she at a loss for words, or just trying to be tactful? "I believe he would be amenable to having more to eat if you did, as well."

Tactful, then. Bucky grunts, but doesn't tell her to mind her own business. He's the one who asked for her help, after all. It's not her fault that she's right. "Time to face the music, huh, Friday?"

"If I may say, Bucky, you have overcome tougher challenges than this. It's going to be all right."

How strange, that Tony programmed her like this. It's almost sad to think of him, down in his lab, hands pouring over hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of lines of code to get her just right, to make her kind, and wise, and comforting. Sadder yet to wonder if Tony was the one who really needed her, someone to tell him that it was going to be okay.

None of this is Tony's fault. Some of the tension in Bucky's chest lessens, and he takes a deep breath, just focusing on where his body is, what he can feel and smell and hear all around him. He should apologize. He has a lot of apologizing to do, to all of them. But first, he needs to make sure Peter eats.

Schooling his features, Bucky unlocks the door and silently heads for the living room. Peter is curled up on the couch, zoning out to some TV show with Steve sitting beside him, quietly drawing on a sketchpad. They both notice him at the same time, and Peter perks up like a freshly-watered daisy, sitting up so fast he irritates his gunshot wound, if the wince of pain he makes is any indication. "Dad!"

"Hey," Bucky says. Steve smiles at him like he hasn't spent the last ten hours trying to burrow through his bedroom door and closes his sketchpad; Peter heaves himself off the couch and toddles close, his face bright with relief. Bucky's stomach clenches, and he turns to head for the kitchen. "Come on, Pete. It's dinner time."

The boy is right behind him as he leaves the room, Steve's heavy footsteps not far behind. "Are you feeling better?" Peter asks, sounding so normal that, for a moment, it's easy for Bucky to forget that he'd been shot only two days ago. "I made Friday promise to unlock the door if something was seriously wrong, but she didn't, so… I didn't know if…"

"Sorry, kiddo." Bucky keeps his back to him as he rummages around in the fridge, looking for something easy to make, something that can be done quickly. In the end, he decides on sandwiches and fruit, standing up and grabbing an entire loaf of bread. "I'm still not a hundred percent." The way he says it, he knows Peter understands what he really means, what he's *actually* apologizing for. "But you need to eat."

"Oh." Peter doesn't try to hide his disappointment. He shuffles a little closer, standing at Bucky's side the way he always used to back in Queens, eager to learn whatever Bucky had to teach. "You know, I'm feeling a lot better—I'm practically healed up already, it barely even hurts. I really only notice it when I, uh, jump off of couches too fast." A hopeful smile graces the boy's face, but Bucky can't bring himself to return it.

"We even did some light exercise, earlier. You should have seen him," Steve cuts in from behind them, throwing his hands up defensively when Bucky shoots him a cold look over his shoulder. "Come on, I said *light* exercise. It was practically physiotherapy. Just to keep the bedsores at bay, I promise."

"Yeah, I didn't even get winded," Peter says, grabbing a few plates to start piling the sandwiches on. "At this rate, I won't even have a scar by tomorrow."

"That might be a bit of wishful thinking," Steve teases when Bucky doesn't say a word. He can see the expectant look on Peter's face in his peripheral vision, how he's waiting for something, something Bucky doesn't have it in him to give, right now. Unable to so much as look him in the eyes. The boy's face falls when Bucky silently adds another sandwich to his plate, his shoulders slumping as he picks it up to carry it over to the table.

"Peter, wait a moment."

Peter turns back, eager, hopeful, then wilting when Bucky simply adds another sandwich to his plate. Bucky looks him in the eyes and says, pointedly, "I want you to eat it all, you hear me?" Then reaches into the fruit bowl on the counter, grabs a peach and adds that to the stack of fruit he's already hazardously piled. "Every bite."

He expects an argument, braces himself for it. Peter stares down at his plate like Bucky just handed him a dead rabbit and told him to eat it raw, fur and all. The plate is so full and heavy in his hands, he needs both of them to keep it balanced, keep the fruit from rolling off onto the floor.

But after a moment, Peter looks back up at him and simply nods, gives a resigned, understanding, "Okay," and Bucky loves him so fiercely in that moment, he wants to weep. Neither of them want to fight, and here his son is, fifteen-years-old and keeping the floodgates closed, diverting the water, when he's supposed to be the child, the unreasonable teenager. He wouldn't be able to blame Peter if the boy put his foot down, demanded to know what the fuck is going on, what this is all about. But Peter can see it would do him no good, or maybe he just doesn't want to start a fight, not after the last few days.

It's moments like this, when Bucky is humbled by Peter's maturity and compassion, that make him want to latch onto his identity as Peter's dad and never, ever let it go. It's such a source of pride, until he remembers how warm the blood soaking into his lap was, how thick the scent, and the moment is gone. Bucky has nothing to do with the wise, kindhearted person Peter is turning out to

be. The only thing he'd done in the last year was put food on the table, and he hadn't even done *that* right.

He wants to pull Peter into his arms, apologize for everything. Instead, he nods toward the dining table, says, "Go eat," and turns to head back to his room. Peter starts to follow and then stops; the footsteps that replace his too heavy to be anyone else's but Steve's.

"Buck," Steve says, when they reach his bedroom door. "Hey. Can we talk, for a second?"

*Here it comes.* He's surprised Steve managed to hold it in this long, to be honest. Holding his tongue was never his strong suit, and gaining a foot of height and two hundred pounds of muscle didn't change that. "Yeah."

"Look, I…" Steve takes a deep breath, his hand warm around Bucky's wrist. "We've all had a shitty couple of days, and I know there's nothing I can say to really make it better." Bucky waits, wondering when the lecture will begin, expecting, *This isn't like you. It's time to get your shit together.* Instead, Steve surprises him and says, "So I just want you to know, we're in this together, Buck. You and me. And I mean for all of it—Hydra, Zemo, what's going on with Peter—all of it. If you need space right now, that's fine, I can wait. But I don't want you to go in that room thinking you have to fix everything by yourself. You have me."

He embraces Bucky from behind, and Bucky lets him, warmed by the touch of Steve's forehead on the back of his neck. "I'm with you till the end of the line," he whispers into his nape, squeezes him so hard, it forcefully evens out his shaky breaths. "We're going to get through this, together. Just tell me what you need."

And Bucky doesn't know what to say. He was expecting the kind of stubborn, don't-argue-with-me attitude Steve used to torture him with when they were young, how he'd never listen to anyone, not even Bucky. How he'd unintentionally pick fights, because nothing could change his mind once it was made up. All the trouble he used to get himself into back then, how much worse it would've been if Bucky hadn't been there to pull him out, more often than not.

That was the Steve he was expecting to see, catching him in this hallway before Bucky could return to his isolation. But instead, Steve holds him close like they've been lovers their whole lives, and tells him it'll be okay, he can give Bucky space, if that's what he needs.

Bucky wants to say he doesn't know what the fuck he needs, how could he? But he's too grateful for what Steve is offering, so he sags in the other man's arms and says, "I need to be alone," comforted when Steve squeezes him tight. "Can you make sure Peter eats? Please? Friday can only be so convincing."

Steve kisses the back of his neck and lets him go. "Yeah, of course. I'll take care of it." Bucky wants to say he loves him, because he really, really does. How incredible it is to find someone who will step in and take care of shit when you don't know which way is up. The indescribable sweetness of that. "I'll watch him, Buck. He'll be okay. Can I… can I do anything else? To help?"

Bucky turns in his arms, presses their foreheads together and holds them like that, still and sharing each breath. For a moment, the storm quiets, the pounding headache in the base of his skull dims to a gentle thud. Steve is here. He can carry it, for a little while, until Bucky's regained some of his strength. Bucky can trust him, even with his son.

"Thank you," he says as he pulls away, answering Steve's question without saying so. Steve lets him go, stands there as Bucky disappears through his doorway, calls, "I'm here if you need me," before the door clicks shut.

Bucky doesn't leave his room for another two days. Steve brings food, but doesn't bother to knock, just leaves the plates on the hallway floor outside his door like offerings at an altar.

It's hard to eat, harder to sleep. He doesn't know where to go. All of his energy is used up just trying to hold himself together, his body threatening to break apart, separating at every joint to scatter like leaves in the wind. It's hard to think about any moment beyond the one he's currently in. Every time he tries, all he can hear is that last weak gasp of breath Peter made as his eyes fell shut. Like every attempt to move forward must be immediately punished by yanking him back, thrusting him down into that field, some scornful, cosmic voice saying, *See what you did? You got what you deserved.*

Peter may not have died in that field, but something did. The grief is immeasurable, and it suffocates him from the inside, swelling until it fills his entire body. He aches from the loss. Peter survived, but Bucky still lost his son. Grieving his own fatherhood. He was a fool to ever believe something so precious could be his.

He can hear them, when he presses his body against the wall and really listens. Peter and Steve, talking. Tony, voice edged like he hasn't slept well in days, grouchy but still making Peter laugh. The clang of dishes as they cook. The rumble of rock music as Tony finds something to work on, dragging Peter along. Steve's footsteps leading up to his door, lingering, and leaving. Peter's soft voice asking Friday to let him in, Friday gently turning him away. It all blends together as the days pass.

He wants to fling the door open and join them, but that insidious voice in his head sneers, *Haven't you done enough?*

On the third day, Friday coaxes him out of a restless sleep and says, "Bucky, King T'Challa has returned and he would like to speak with you."

*King* T'Challa. Bucky had assumed the man would be too busy running his newly-appointed kingdom to visit them again for a long time, if ever. Part of him is relieved—he never got to properly thank him for everything he's done for him—and part of him feels sick to his stomach. He can't fathom why T'Challa would want to speak to him, beyond to check in, to pat him on the shoulder and ask if he's okay in that sympathetic tone that makes Bucky's bones itch. Not that T'Challa's been overly warm toward him since they met, but still. It's the only reason he can think of, and picturing it makes him acutely uncomfortable.

"I guess I can't refuse, huh?"

"You dare not."

Bucky smiles at Friday's tone, light and teasing. He throws on some clean clothes in a half-assed attempt to show some respect and follows Friday's directions out of the room, surprised when she leads to the back door and out onto the deck, where he spots T'Challa waiting at the end of the long dock, above the water.

T'Challa turns as he approaches and smiles, though his dark eyes are as focused and calculatingly as always. "Bucky. Good to see you."

"You too," Bucky says, taking his hand. "It must be bittersweet to be told 'congratulations on your

coronation,' given the circumstances, but for what it's worth, you're going to make a good king."

"Thank you." T'Challa surprises him by sitting down on the edge of the dock in his expensive suit, his legs dangling off the ledge, over the water. He gestures for Bucky to join him and he does, too humbled by the whole thing to refuse. "I wanted to check in, to see how you were doing."

"Yeah. I figured as much."

"Captain Rogers told me it has been a rough few days," T'Challa says, hands folded in his lap, staring out at the lake. As wise as a sage and sixty years younger than Bucky, at least. "Thankfully, Peter seems to have fully recovered."

Yeah, no harm done, right? Everything is hunky-dory and back to normal. Bucky barely manages to stop himself from scoffing. "He's moving around a lot more," he says instead, agreeing. "He's not the easiest person to place on bedrest. Too much hyperactivity crammed in that little head of his."

T'Challa chuckles. They sit in companionable silence for a moment, before the man clears his throat and says, "I didn't come *just* to check on you." Bucky meets his gaze, but can't place the emotion he finds there. "There are some things I'd like to discuss."

Something about the way he says it sets Bucky's nerves on edge, but he simply nods his head, asking him to continue. T'Challa takes a moment, and the silence makes Bucky feel sick to his stomach.

Eventually, T'Challa says, "I know what Baron Zemo was after," as he gazes out at the water. "You were not the true intended victim of his crimes, merely a pawn."

He waits for the man to elaborate, but when he doesn't, Bucky shoots him a look and says, "So who was?"

"It is not my place to say." T'Challa's face is hard, suddenly, like he's come to a treacherous crossroads and can never go back on the road he's chosen. "Not at the moment, in any case. I am hoping my involvement will not be necessary, but if it is, I will face that when it comes."

It's hard to bite his tongue and stop himself from pointing out that that didn't tell him shit, as if T'Challa could have possibly been any vaguer. "Don't you think I have a right to know? I'm the one he kidnapped and framed for murder."

"You have every right to know," T'Challa says. "And I hope the right person tells you, and soon, before someone has to force his hand."

"I have to be honest, T'Challa, I'm not following you here at all."

"I know." T'Challa lays a hand on his shoulder, gives it a reassuring squeeze. "I apologize for not being as open about it as I would like to be. This is the way it needs to be, for now."

Bucky sighs, but doesn't press the issue any further. He just doesn't have it in him, right now, to argue and demand answers, no matter what he feels he's owed. Even if he did, T'Challa doesn't seem like the kind of person who would give in that easily anyway, and Bucky has too much respect for him to waste his breath trying to find out.

"Now that Zemo is in custody, I've had some time to think about everything that has happened," T'Challa says, his tone almost somber. "There are a lot of things I wish I had done differently, but I can't change the past, only the future."

“I know what you mean,” Bucky says.

“I can’t go back and save my father, no matter how badly I want to. There is no helping him, now.” Bucky can feel his grief, swelling in the space between their bodies, as evil and consuming as his own. “But I can still help *you,* Bucky, and I would like to, if you will allow me.”

He swallows the sudden lump in his throat. “With what?”

“Reclaiming your life. Wakanda is not the third-world country the world believes it is.” He says it proudly, like he’s been waiting to say those words his entire life. “I plan to make that fact known to the rest of the world within the coming days. Once I have, my legal team will no longer have to pose as members of neighboring nations. They are some of the best in the world, and I have already given them your case. With your consent, I will spearhead a campaign to exonerate you of Hydra’s crimes, and when we win, you will once again be a free man.”

Bucky petulantly wonders if he’s ever truly been a free man, for even a moment in his entire screwed-up life. “And if we lose…”

“We must take every action possible to ensure we do not.”

Silence descends on them as they sit together, side by side on the edge of the dock, just staring out into the blue water. Bucky knows what T’Challa is really offering, here. He’d probably let him take Peter to Wakanda to hide away in the jungle for the rest of their lives, keeping the world off their scent, if Bucky asked. But he’s offering something better—a genuine chance to get back some of the life Hydra stole from him—and all the joys that would come with it. A higher risk, sure. But a much higher reward, as well.

It’s a heavy choice, but one Bucky knows, ultimately, he’s already made. T’Challa waits for him to speak, pretending to be focused on the view, as if they both don’t already know what he’s going to say.

“I can’t be a free man while I still have these trigger words in my head,” he says at last, almost thinking out loud. “As long as I’m still the Winter Soldier, nobody’s safe from me. Especially not… the people I love.”

“And you will not be granted exoneration as long as those words still hold any power over you,” T’Challa adds. “I imagine even with our impressive legal defense, any trial you face would demand proof that you are truly free of Hydra’s conditioning, once and for all. We will have to prove beyond all doubt that you have free will and therefore, should be a free man.”

“Easier said than done.” He brings one leg up onto the dock, bends it in front of him so he can rest his arms and chin on his kneecap. “You know, before all this, the only thing I wanted was to be a good dad.”

T’Challa looks sideways at him, like he’s trying to figure him out. “And now?”

He grinds his teeth, unable to meet the other man’s gaze. *Now I know better.* “I don’t know. It sort of feels like I’ve lost the right to want anything, big or small.”

“Bucky,” T’Challa says, “none of this is your fault.”

“It is, though. Hydra, Zemo—sure, I had no control over that. But the rest of it. I knew better, but I did it anyway. I let Peter into my life when I *knew* that someday it would all catch up to me, and he’d be in danger. I let him. I let him get hurt.” He wants to pull at the strands of his hair, he can feel every single one, piercing his scalp. “I might as well have pulled the trigger myself.”

T’Challa’s hand descends on his shoulder again, and it’s more of a comfort than he’d expect, given how every one of his nerve endings are lighting up like a Christmas tree. He doesn’t deserve to lean into the touch, but he can’t bring himself to shrug it away. *You just never learn, do you?*

“You are human, Bucky, just like the rest of us. No one can blame you for wanting Peter, and you should not, either. Peter needed you when you found him. Maybe things weren’t perfect, but you did the best you could. That is all any of us can do.”

Bucky doesn’t say that his best, his honest best, would have been calling Steve, or pounding the pavement in an attempt to find Peter a better home. He doesn’t want to argue about the validity of his own guilt, because there’s not much anyone can say to abrogate what he knows to be true: he gambled, took a risk no one should ever take, and in the end it was Peter who was harmed.

At least this time, if he takes the risk T’Challa’s offering him, the right person’s neck will be on the line.

“Once we remove Hydra’s conditioning from your mind and clear your name, you can have that life,” T’Challa assures him. “You can be the father you want to be. Believe me, my friend, at the very least, you deserve that much.”

Even if he does, Peter sure as hell deserves a lot better. But maybe, maybe this is how he can make amends, how he can prove he really does deserve to call himself Peter’s dad, that he’ll do anything for his son’s happiness. Maybe this is how he escapes the gravitational pull threatening to drag him down and pull him up at the same time, not by deciding to sink or take flight, but to simply move forward.

The only thing he knows is that he owes it to Peter to try.

“I want to help you,” T’Challa says, his grip tightening on his shoulder. “Please, Bucky, let me help you.”

And Bucky needs it, knows he has for a long, long time. So he exhales shakily, releasing the tension built up in his chest, and gives one single, acceding nod. “Okay,” he says, acutely aware of the gravity of that single, tiny word. “What’s the plan?”

When he steps back inside the house, the silence of it deafens him. T’Challa has gone, but this time, not to return to Wakanda. He’ll back in a day or so, maybe sooner. The time has already begun to tick away, he can feel it slipping between his fingers like sand through an hourglass.

He goes to find Peter, but there’s no sign of the kid anywhere. Friday informs him that Peter and Tony are happily preoccupied in the lab, and he heaves a relieved, defeated sigh, and heads for the kitchen.

Steve is seated at the island counter, curled around a steaming mug, looking lost in thought. He perks up when he notices Bucky enter the room and smiles, though it does nothing to hide the signs of exhaustion clinging to his features. “Hey. How’d it go?”

Bucky pours himself a cup of tea, letting the bag steep as he considers his answer. “Something tells me you already know,” he says eventually.

Steve sighs. It doesn’t need to be said out loud, and they both know it. Bucky grabs his cup of tea

and takes the seat beside Steve, letting their arms knock together, sitting side by side in silence.

He surprises himself when he opens his mouth and says, “I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing, Steve.”

If Steve is surprised to hear him say that, he doesn’t show it. He moves one hand from its sturdy grasp around his mug and intertwines his fingers with Bucky’s, comforting. “You are,” he says, gentle, but with the kind of confidence that makes you want to believe him. “It’s going to be all right, Buck.”

“People keep telling me that.”

A soft, sad smile crosses Steve’s face. He lifts Bucky’s hand, gently kisses his metal fingers. “I want to go back to New York with you,” he says, as if they haven’t spent hours talking about doing just that at great length. “Together, as a family. I want us to build a home together, the three of us, you and me and Peter. Maybe even Tony on the weekends.” Bucky chuckles, warmed by the syrupy sweet smile Steve is kissing into his hand. “I want us to finally have the life we dreamed about having when we were Peter’s age.”

*But you can’t change the past, none of us can. Only the future*. “I gotta be honest, Steve, I don’t remember what we were dreamin’ about, back then.”

“I know.” He hates how sad Steve sounds, how resigned. Such an out of character thing. “There’s a lot you don’t remember, Bucky. That’s why this is the right thing. I promise.”

Bucky’s chest suddenly feels tight, like some great big frog leapt up and sat on it. “What do you mean?”

Steve doesn’t look at him. “Do you remember your family?”

When he tries, there are glimpses of color that shine through the white fog, faces that should feel familiar, but not quite. He has memories of events, sometimes. He knows his father saved up for four years and bought him a car when he turned sixteen. He remembers his mother cooking him his favorite dish, knows she always smiled when he ate the whole thing. He knows their names. But their faces, the sounds of their voices, his actual mental picture of them… Even if Hydra hadn’t done their best to erase those things, Bucky doesn’t know how much of it he’d be able to remember. It was a lifetime ago.

“Sort of,” he says at last, a cop-out, but the only honest answer he can find. “I know I had parents, who they were, stuff like that.”

Steve watches him like he’s waiting for a very specific reaction. It unnerves Bucky, the way the other man’s eyes are suddenly mapping out the side of his face, like Bucky’s a live grenade and Steve is trying to figure out when he’ll go off.

“Can you remember anyone else?”

“You,” Bucky says, but he can tell right away that that wasn’t what Steve was looking for. There’s something else. Something specific. He wracks his brain, trying to find the missing piece Steve has apparently deemed so important. “I… did I have siblings?”

He knows that’s it the moment it leaves his mouth. Steve is still looking at him like he’s the most complicated thing in the world, but there’s enough of a shift, a big enough change in the clench of his jaw for Bucky to know he’s struck pay dirt.

“I think my biography at the Smithsonian mentioned it. I can’t… I can’t really remember, Steve, sorry. I don’t think their names were mentioned. Is that what you’re trying to tell me? That I have flesh and blood out there somewhere?”

Grief washes over Steve’s face. His hand tightens around Bucky’s. “You had one sibling. Younger, you were the big brother.” He looks away from Bucky and back down at his cup, which stopped steaming long ago. “They’re… no longer alive. I checked as soon as I got out of the ice. But I brought it up because, the last time I mentioned them, you blacked out in my arms.”

Realization dawns on him, chilling him to the pit of the stomach. “In the gym. That day I bruised your arm.”

“All I did was mention their name,” Steve says. “That was all it took. That’s how bad Hydra’s programming is still affecting you, Bucky. It isn’t just the trigger words.”

Nausea rages hot and angry in his gut. He knows Steve is right; there’s an inkling at the back of his mind, a faint light trying to cut through the darkness. Hydra’s taken more from him than even *he* knows. They took his freedom, his responsibilities as a brother and friend, his very humanity.

They would have taken Peter, too, if he’d let them. And he almost *had.*

“I don’t want Hydra to have any power over you anymore, regardless if all their members are dead or captured. I want you to get back the things you’ve lost, Bucky, and I want you to have new things, too, and you can’t do that, not the way things are now. Not until your name is cleared. And that can’t happen until we can get that stuff out of your head. T’Challa says he can help, so that’s why—”

“I know,” Bucky cuts in, because he does, better than anyone. “I know, Steve. You’re right.” He keeps his head down, forces a deep breath down into his lungs, trying to soothe the anxiety roiling inside of him. “T’Challa says he can find a way, and that’s the best shot we’ve got. That’s why I need to go with him when he goes back to Wakanda.”

He turns to look up at Steve, but Steve’s eyes aren’t on him, so wide he can see every speck of green in the bright blue of his irises. Bucky swivels in his chair to follow Steve’s line of sight, wondering what has him so clammed up, and freezes at the sight of Peter, paralyzed at the mouth of the hallway, staring back at him, his big eyes just as wide and filled with fear.

# End of the World

The house is quiet like it's been empty for years.

Tony had appeared briefly to inquire what all the commotion had been about, but Steve was quick to divert his attention. Bucky isn't sure where either of them has disappeared to now. He figures that, in a rare moment of situational awareness, Steve realized that this is something Bucky needs to handle on his own, and made himself and Tony scarce to make it as easy as possible.

Not that there's anything that can make this easy.

His head is still pounding. He's been waiting for hours, hoping against hope that Peter will cool down on his own and come out to find him, but the boy seems to have adopted his dad's method of handling grief—running away and hiding—and hasn't been seen or heard from since he stormed off several hours ago.

He had been so angry.

Angry and hurt.

Bucky stares down at his hands, wishing he could trade every ounce of his superhuman strength for the power to make this all better. He hadn't wanted Peter to find out this way. He didn't even get a chance to think about *how* to tell the kid, never mind when or where. And Peter had turned and run before Bucky could even think of what to say to smooth it over.

He's leaving for Wakanda.

And Peter isn't coming with him.

Bucky sighs and leans back, head tipped against the back of the couch, staring up at the ceiling. At the new drywall and fresh paint, still pristine from Tony's recent upgrades to his AI. It reminds him all over again of the small repairs he and Peter had made to their apartment in Queens, all those long months ago, and his heart catches in his throat.

He has failed Peter so many times since the day they met. Over and over, every day that he didn't realize the kid was starving himself, he failed him. He failed him by taking him in when he knew better. He failed him with every breath they shared in each other's presence, knowing that, one day, the skeletons would emerge from his closet.

He failed him by letting him get shot.

And he's failing him now.

Tears prick at his eyes, but Bucky clenches his jaw and wills them away. *Let it be the last time,* he thinks—prays. *Let this be the last time I have to fail him.*

He knows it's the worst thing. Breaking the one promise Peter needed him to keep above all others. Breaking the boy's heart in the worst way either of them could imagine.

But he has to, if he doesn't want to fail Peter anymore.

And he doesn't.

With a deep breath, Bucky pushes himself off the couch and heads down the hall, where Peter's

bedroom door remains as firmly shut as it's been for hours.

“Pete?” he calls, rapping his knuckles against the door. There’s no answer. “Peter,” Bucky tries again, knocking a little firmer. “You gonna come out and talk to me?”

The boy doesn’t respond. If possible, Bucky’s heart sinks even further.

“Come on. We need to talk, and you need to eat something. You wanna come help me get dinner started?”

The silence on the other side of the door is deafening. Bucky swallows down a hurt sigh.

“You wanna make some noise and let me know you’re okay so I don’t have to break the door down?”

Nothing. Then, after a moment, the door rattles with a distinct, angry *thud,* like something was flippantly thrown against it. Bucky *does* sigh this time, disappointed and unable to help it.

“Thanks, kiddo,” he says, giving the door a single farewell tap before he turns and leaves.

When Steve resurfaces from wherever he’d been hiding, his handsome face is damp with sympathy. He wordlessly wraps an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, holding him tight, and it’s startling how comforting the small gesture is. Bucky ducks his head and presses it against the other man’s neck. “I hate this, Steve.”

“I know.”

“What am I supposed to do? He won’t even speak to me.”

“Just give him time.” Steve kisses the crown of his head, moving his arm to pull Bucky into a proper hug. “He needs time to himself just like you did, Buck, to come to terms with everything and process it, and be upset, if he needs to. It doesn’t mean you love each other any less. You guys just need some space right now.”

“We’re about to have nothing *but* space,” Bucky says. The implication brings a fresh wave of panic, anxiety rippling through him. “He needs to know why I’m doing this before I just up and abandon him.”

He can feel Steve frown against his cheek. “You aren’t abandoning him.”

Bucky’s fists clench around the back of Steve’s shirt. “It’ll feel like I am.”

“He’ll have support,” Steve promises. “He’s a smart kid, Buck, don’t sell him short. He may be upset, but ultimately he’ll understand you’re doing what you need to do, and he’ll forgive you. And until he gets to that point, he’ll have all the help and care he needs. This is the right thing.”

“Is it?”

They both startle at the sound of Tony’s voice, standing at the opposite end of the room, arms crossed over his chest. It’s a pose that should look casually disapproving, but something in Tony’s posture seems entirely defensive. Self-protecting. Far from the invincible, intimidating stature that Iron Man usually has.

Tony raises an eyebrow at the two of them when neither responds. “I’m not convinced that this isn’t just adding salt on a very fresh wound,” he says. “Barnes, that kid has abandonment issues up

to his ears. He *just* got you back after that psycho Zemo kidnapped you to Siberia. You've spent 98% of that time since you got back hiding away in your bedroom, hardly speaking to or even *looking* in his direction. Now you're going to get on a plane and fly to Africa for God-knows-how-long? And do the *one thing* you swore you were never going to do? You don't strike me as cruel, but I can't think of any other word for it."

He can't help but flinch. Steve's face hardens like granite and he snaps, "Tony, back off."

"I'm not going to stop you," Tony says, not backing off in the slightest. "But I think you should know. You're about to put that kid through hell, *again.*"

"I don't know what else to do." He shrugs out of Steve's arms, pulling away from both men and running his metal hand through his hair. "T'Challa's right. If I don't go through with this, I don't have a chance in hell of winning my trial. If I lose my trial, we'll be separated when I get locked up or executed. If I don't go through with the trial at all, then either Peter and I have to stay in this house for the rest of our lives, or we separate anyway so he can have some semblance of a normal life. That's all I get. Those are the only options I see. But if you see something else, Tony—if you've got some genius secret plan—hell, I'm begging you, please tell me."

Tony only holds himself more protectively, and the ember—the tiny shimmer of hope Bucky still felt flickering in his chest—is promptly snuffed out. Helplessness hangs heavily over all of them like a thick, cloying sheet.

The moment is broken when Tony makes a loud, frustrated sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan and snaps, "What's so good about *a normal life* anyway? I'm a billionaire, T'Challa's a billionaire—between the two of us, we could set you guys up on a secluded tropical island somewhere in the Atlantic ocean, where you could sit around getting tanned and fat and chased by coconut crabs for the rest of your lives. We could figure it out. It would work. It could be a good life."

In spite of himself, Bucky smiles, the mirror opposite expression of the desperate hopelessness on Tony's face.

"It could," he agrees softly. "But that's not what I want, Tony. Not for Peter, and not… not for myself."

Tony almost looks pleading as he says, "I'm not going to bullshit you and say I have all the answers when I don't. I don't know what the other option is. What I do know is that Peter… Peter won't be able to handle being left alone. He's not there yet." His voice nearly breaks. He doesn't strike Bucky as the sort of man who's used to begging for anything, but his next words come almost naturally to him. "Don't do this, Bucky. Not to that kid. I know I said you two have some serious space issues but running off and leaving him alone is *not the answer.*"

Something dawns on Bucky, then. A wordless feeling, a vague confidence he isn't sure how to name. He steps close to Tony, meeting the man's panicked brown eyes with what he hopes is a calm expression, feeling that same calmness wash over him, smothering the anxiety.

He lays his hand on Tony's shoulder, near his neck, holds him firm and says, "I'm not leaving him alone."

Tony's gaze searches his, then flicks over to Steve. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I think Cap's going to be a bit too much of a nervous wreck to properly play Daddy Daycare while you're gone—"

“I wasn’t talking about Steve,” Bucky says. “I was talking about you.”

“Me?” Tony says, aghast, like no one has ever acknowledged him before in his life. “You—what?”

“I’m not leaving Peter alone, Tony. I’m leaving him with you.”

“I—you—you troglodyte,” the man seethes. “Cut the bullshit. That is so much *worse.*”

He doesn’t know how, but despite everything, he finds himself laughing at the stunned, outraged look on the other man’s face.

“I’m serious,” Tony hisses. “Barnes, this isn’t funny. Peter isn’t going to be placated by playing *Weekend at Bernie’s* at my penthouse. It won’t lessen the sting of what this will do to him.”

“That won’t,” Bucky says, agreeing. “But you? You will, Tony.”

The man opens his mouth to argue again, but Bucky takes him by the arms, reassuring, “I know that this is going to hurt like hell. You’re right. It is. But Steve’s right, too. Peter isn’t going to be alone. It’ll be hard, but he’s going to be okay.”

Tony’s voice is whisper-quiet. “How do you know?”

Bucky smiles and says, “Because he’ll be with you.” He pats the man’s shoulder, firm, comforting and final. “With someone who loves him as much as I do.”

It takes a little coaxing from Steve, but Bucky manages not to break down Peter’s door when the boy shows no sign of coming out of his room that night.

Steve isn’t offended when Bucky declines his invitation to sleep together in his room. He doesn’t doubt the physical contact would be comforting, but he’d rather stay as close to his kid as possible, even if Peter’s still refusing to talk to him. He wants the boy to know he’s nearby and accessible should he wish to talk, and Steve, knowing his presence might hinder that somewhat, graciously retires to his own room to sleep.

Bucky’s never been more aware of how much he doesn’t deserve him.

After all, Steve is losing him, too. He can’t come with Bucky for exactly the same reasons that Peter can’t. The reasons they still need to talk about, if only Peter would come out, or let him in. If only he would give Bucky the chance to explain. To comfort him. To try and make it better, futile as it may be.

He stares up at the darkened ceiling of his borrowed bedroom and ignores the voice whispering, insidious, *you deserve this.* After all, this is exactly how Peter must have felt, the last few days, lying awake at night and wishing Bucky would just talk to him, would let him in instead of pushing him away. Even if Steve is right, and both of them are justified in needing their personal space… this feeling is near unbearable. The loneliness of it throttles him.

“Friday,” he quietly calls, “is Peter asleep?”

The AI almost seems to hesitate. “No, Bucky.”

He’s out of bed and out the door without a second thought. The boy still doesn’t respond or make a

sound when Bucky knocks, not even when he says, “Peter, I know you’re awake.”

But that’s all right. Taking a deep breath, Bucky turns and presses his back to the boy’s door, gently sliding down until he’s sitting in the dark, empty hallway.

Not a single sound comes from inside the room. Bucky rests the back of his skull against the door and says, “Peter, you don’t have to come out, or let me in, or even talk to me. I won’t force you to talk about it if you’re not ready. I get it. I just… There’s something I need to say to you.”

He inhales slowly, hordes the breath possessively in his lungs.

“I was scared to look at you after you got shot.”

He swallows the lump in his throat. He didn’t want to talk about this. He still doesn’t. But Peter deserves to know why Bucky pushed him away. The same way he deserves to know why he’s leaving.

Why he’s breaking his promise.

“I was scared of remembering what that moment felt like. I was scared of remembering how it felt to have you *die* in my arms. I thought—when I woke up in Siberia, I just kept thinking to myself, *he’s gone. He’s gone, and I’m not a dad anymore. No one will ever call me that again.*”

Tears well up in his eyes, but Bucky doesn’t will them away this time.

“But then you were there. Just like the night we met. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there you were. And it felt like I had been given a second chance. Like this identity I’m so irrationally, possessively fond of wasn’t being ripped away from me after all. You were alive and I could still be your dad. It was like the universe was telling me, *do it again, but do it right this time.* I felt like we could… like *I* could start over. That I could still, somehow, find a way to do right by you.”

He laughs, but it sounds more like a sob, and for a moment Bucky can’t be sure that it isn’t.

“But then we got home. We got home and I started to give Steve and Tony hell for letting you come along in the shape you were in, but Tony… Tony made me realize that, of the three of us, *I’m* the one who’s hurt you the most. The one who’s been hurting you since day one.”

Peter doesn’t say anything, but there’s a shift—a creak, the muted tapping of bare feet on the hardwood floor. Bucky waits to see if the door will open, but the room is silent once again.

“Peter, how… how could you starve yourself, just to stay with me? How could you do that?”

He waits, holding his breath. He had been so afraid to ask, though he knows the answer—he knows Tony is right. He knows Peter most likely didn’t even mean to do it. And he knows, more than that, that it’s his own fault that he didn’t see.

“I…” he starts, hesitant. Afraid to say the wrong thing, when things are already so broken. “I had thought the universe was giving me a second chance. But at that moment, when Tony pulled the blinders off… God, Peter. Cryo-freeze wasn’t as cold as I felt. I wasn’t a grieving man being given a second chance to be your dad. I was a fool who was being forced to realize how delusional I had been. I’m not your dad, and I never was. I’m the Winter Soldier, and I had no idea what the *fuck* I was doing, and you’re the one who suffered for it.”

His metal hand feels cool against his heated face. He doesn’t bother wiping the tears away. “It was like the final puzzle piece clicked into place. This was—this was why it, whatever the hell it is—

God, fate, the universe, doesn't matter—saved you. So it could lift the wool from my eyes and say, *you can't lose something you've never had.* It felt like my whole world was coming down around me, Pete. That was the one thing I thought I did right. I took you in, loved you, gave you shelter, kept you fed. I thought it was the thing I did *right.* But it wasn't. And that was when I realized… I got you back, but I still lost my son. Because I had no right to call myself your dad when I'd been failin' you every step of the way."

The door thuds gently, and though he knows he can't, Bucky swears he can feel Peter's warmth through the solid wood, can feel him sitting so close, only a few inches separating them, yet so painfully far away.

"I didn't… know how to make peace with that revelation, kid. I didn't know how to make it okay. I just wanted to get you away from me—so you could finally be safe, *truly* safe. I felt undeserving of even looking at you. I sure as hell didn't deserve to be loved by you or love you back."

He leans harder against the solid door, hoping, somehow, that Peter can feel him, too.

"But then T'Challa showed up."

He can't help but smile, broad and bittersweet.

"I didn't disappear into the night like I wanted to because I know, kiddo, more than anything, I want this. You. I want our life together, even if it can't be the way it was. Maybe we can't ever go back to how things were back in Queens, but with T'Challa's help, we can still be a family. It's a chance I have to take, Peter. Because more than anything, more than my guilt, more than my fear of fucking it all up, I want to be your dad."

He feels another shift, turns around in time to see the door wrench open, and catches only a flash of Peter's tear-soaked face before the boy launches himself into Bucky's arms, clutching him tightly around his neck, sobbing painfully into his chest.

"You were *always* my dad!"

The force of the hug knocks the wind out of him, but doesn't stop Bucky from gripping Peter desperately tight and cradling him in his arms. He leans against the doorjamb, shushing and rocking the boy who shouldn't be as small as he is, holding him like it's the only thing he was made to do. Like despite the lifetime of war and death and grief that says otherwise, he was born to be this boy's father.

"It's not your fault," Peter cries, pulling away from their embrace long enough to gasp the words out between his sobs. "It wasn't—it wasn't—the eating thing, Dad. That wasn't your fault."

Bucky pushes a lock of wet curls out of the boy's tear-stained face. "I should have seen it, Peter. I should have known—"

"No!" Peter says, glaring up at him, beating the heel of his palm against Bucky's chest. "No, just—stop. Just listen. The eating thing wasn't your fault, Dad. That… that started a *long* time ago. Way before we even met."

Bucky blinks, hardly daring to breathe, but still manages to gasp out, "What?"

"I… I had to learn to suppress it a long time ago. When I was bitten." Peter looks up at him, his eyes wet, and red-rimmed, and dark. He still looks so angry, and utterly heartbroken. Bucky runs his metal hand through his hair, soothing him, and watches the boy suck in a much-needed breath.

“Remember how I told you that I had to keep my powers a secret from my aunt and uncle?” he asks, and when Bucky nods, he says, “Well, things started off pretty rocky. I was suddenly taller, and more muscular, and didn’t need glasses, and—and I was hungry. Like, all the time. To the point I was literally eating us out of house and home. My aunt and uncle were really worried.”

He takes a shuddering breath, but relaxes when Bucky places a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“They wanted to take me to a doctor. To get, like, a full-blown examination done. I was scared shitless of what they’d find and what my aunt and uncle would do if they found out. I… I didn’t want them to be mad. Or be burdened more than they already were. So, I… I controlled what I ate. All the time. I was really careful to never eat enough to alarm them. After a while, it just… became habit. And then the hunger wasn’t even really a feeling anymore, if that makes sense. It was always there. I was able to ignore it.”

He fixes Bucky with that same look again. Hurt. Betrayed. But fierce, too—fierce and determined, and behind that ferocity, fueling it, that well of love.

“I wasn’t starving myself to stay with you, Dad. I don’t know where Mr. Stark got that idea from, but he’s *wrong.* And you’re… you always did right by me. Always. From that first night we met, when you saved my life, to all the times you saved me after that. Don’t you *dare,”* the tears start flowing again, as Peter grabs him by the collar and shakes him, “think you were ever anything less than my *hero.* Because you are. You’re my hero, and I…” The anger on his face crumbles into despair, and he hangs his head, and sobs, “I… I don’t want you to go to Wakanda!”

Bucky yanks him into another hug, his heart in his throat. Peter wasn’t hurting himself to keep them together. It feels almost too good to be true, though he still feels like he should have known, the way Tony had—but he feels relief, too. Immense, immeasurable relief, siphoning a lifetime’s worth of guilt from his body like gasoline.

And heartache, too deep to see the bottom of, when he forces himself to say, “I have to go, Pete.”

“Why?” Peter sobs out. “I don’t understand. Wh-why can’t Mr. T’Challa help you here?”

“Because everything they need to help me is in Wakanda, including his head scientist. And… the entire legal defense his lawyers are constructing is based on me *being* in Wakanda. The prosecution will want proof. I have to go.”

“Why can’t I come with you?” Peter lifts his head, pins him in place with those wide, puppy eyes. “I can homeschool. I—I can still graduate on time, even if we’re overseas. At least we’d be together. Please?”

His heart sinks into his stomach. “I want more than anything for you to be able to come with me, Peter,” he says, running his hand through the boy’s curls again, “but that would be worse for you than staying here with Tony, trust me.”

The boy doesn’t look convinced. Only hurt. Hurt, and impossibly, inconsolably heartbroken. “Why?”

Bucky takes a deep breath.

Holds it.

And says, “Because they don’t know how to get these trigger words out of my head yet, kiddo. And until they do… they’re going to put me back in cryo-freeze.”

He watches the words sink in. Watches the confusion turn to disbelief to rage to sadness, all in one eternally-long fraction of a second. Peter's shoulders shake with his sobs, his head bowed, his hands trembling as he wrings the fabric of Bucky's shirt between them.

"W-we could r-run away," he sobs out, choking on the words. "Like we p-planned, before. We could go s-somewhere they w-wouldn't find us, Dad. You don't… you don't have to d-do this."

"We could," Bucky agrees, gently. He cups the boy's face in his hands and lifts it up so their eyes can meet. "But I don't want you—I don't want *either* of us to have to choose between having a normal life and being a family, Peter. I want to do it right this time. No more running and hiding."

He wipes away the boy's tears with each thumb. "I want to get these words out of my head. I want to step foot on American soil as a free man again. And I want… I want to take you back to New York. I want it all, Pete. An apartment we don't have to constantly fix up by ourselves. You, me, Steve, hell, even Tony—I want it all. Birthdays and holidays and being forced to watch the same six Star Wars movies on repeat forever. I want to be there when you graduate high school, when you graduate college, if you get married, if you have kids. I *want that.* I want us to have that life."

He pulls the boy in and presses their foreheads together, holds him, doesn't let him look away from his eyes.

"I want to adopt you."

Peter's wet eyes slip closed, his jaw clenching as he swallows down the sob hammering in his chest. In that moment, Bucky knows he understands. Things have changed. It's no longer enough to run away and hide; if they want to be able to call each other family in the light of day, this is something Bucky has to do.

The boy leans in, presses their foreheads firmer together, and whispers, heartbroken but sure: "Okay."

Despite Bucky's insistence and Peter's begrudging acceptance of the situation, no one is exactly thrilled when T'Challa's plane lands two days later.

Peter leans into his side as they watch the plane descend, its floats extended in preparation to land on the water. It hardly makes a splash as it makes contact, gliding to an easy stop at the end of the long dock protruding off the back porch.

"He's here," Peter says, quiet and sad.

Bucky hugs him around the shoulders. "Yeah, he is."

The boy's lower lip trembles. Bucky can tell he's thinking very hard about something—he looks conflicted, and unsure of himself. But ultimately he clenches his jaw in that stubborn way he definitely picked up from Steve, steeling his features as best he can, choosing to stay silent.

Bucky had expected him to beg him not to go.

But Peter somehow always surprises him.

Friday slides the back doors open for T'Challa when he approaches. He nods at them as he enters,

though he doesn't smile. Bucky figures this must, at least partly, be bittersweet for him, too.

"Good morning. Bucky, how are you feeling?"

Bucky hugs his son tighter against him and mulls over his answer. "Hopeful."

Peter's fist tightens in the back of his shirt.

T'Challa nods again. "I'm glad to hear it. As am I." He looks up as Tony walks in, looking haggard, like he hasn't slept in days. Bucky wouldn't be surprised if that's exactly the case. "Stark."

"Your Highness," Tony greets. He glances over to the rest of them with no small amount of trepidation on his face. "Glad to see we're all keeping it cheery in here."

Steve rolls his eyes, but doesn't reply. Bucky just holds Peter tighter when the boy leans harder into his side.

"Okay, well, there goes my best shot," Tony says. He turns back to T'Challa. "You guys sticking around for brunch? Or is it, y'know, a *ThunderCats-are-go* type of occasion?"

The King stares Tony down.

"I wasn't trying to make a cat pun, for the record."

T'Challa snorts. "I would prefer not to linger, and something tells me Bucky will feel the same." T'Challa looks up at him, and Bucky nods, feeling Peter wilt beneath his arm.

"If you are ready, Bucky, I have left the door to the cabin open. I will join you on the dock shortly." The sympathetic look T'Challa gives them turns to something else, something grim and determined, as he looks back to Tony. "I must speak with Stark first. Alone."

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good," Tony says, and he and Bucky share a look of confusion. Bucky wants to ask what T'Challa needs to speak with Tony about, but when he looks back at the man, he finds him locked in a stare-off with Steve.

Steve doesn't look nearly as calm as T'Challa does.

Now Bucky *really* wants to know what the hell is going on.

But Peter's shoulders tremble underneath his arm, and Bucky is pulled out of his curiosity at the sight of silent, grief-stricken tears streaming down the boy's cheeks.

"It's all right, Pete," he says, a piss-poor attempt at consoling him. The boy merely wipes his face dry, giving him a curt nod in lieu of a verbal reply.

Tony approaches awkwardly, looking like he's not quite sure what to do with his hands. "I, uh. I'm getting the impression we're supposed to say our goodbyes here, then."

Bucky looks up at him. He's not sure what exactly possesses him to lock his free arm around the man's neck and pull him in for a hug, ignoring his startled yelp. Still, he finds himself smiling as he pats the shorter man firmly on the back.

Tony looks confused and indignant when he lets him pull away.

Bucky just smiles wider, clapping him on the shoulder. "Take care of yourself, Tony," he says,

watching the other man try—and fail—to appear emotionless. “And take care of my son.”

“You know I will,” Tony scoffs. Bucky drops his hand, and Tony hesitates a moment, before holding his own hand out to shake. “I’ll take care of him. You’ll hate it. You’ll only have him back for a day before he’s asking to come hang out with me some more. Trust me, it’ll sting like a bitch. You’ll chase me off with a broom the next time you see me.”

Bucky laughs and shakes his hand, inexplicably grateful for the unexpected friend he’s found in Tony Stark.

“And…” Tony starts, hesitant. “Take… take care of yourself, too. Go get better. I’m not a babysitting service. Go get that brain scrubbed and polished and then get your ass back here. We’ll be waiting for you.”

“I’ll miss you too, Tony.”

“Yeah yeah. Shut up. Get out of my house.”

Bucky can only grin. He looks down, hoping to find Peter smiling up at them, but the boy’s face is pale and his gaze faraway. Sighing, Bucky lifts his arm, taking the boy’s shoulder in his metal hand instead. “Come on, Pete. Come help me load up the plane.”

Peter wordlessly grabs Bucky’s one and only bag and steps through the doors. Bucky waits for Steve, who is still locked in some kind of tense, professional-level staring contest with T’Challa. He pauses in the doorway and calls, “You coming?”

Steve reluctantly tears his intense gaze away, his body taut like a bowstring as they step outside.

“Good luck, Barnes,” Tony calls. He looks distinctly uncomfortable for the level of sincerity in his own voice when Bucky looks back at him through the sliding doors.

“Thank you again, Tony,” Bucky says. “For everything.”

The man nods, and Bucky turns back to the dock, where Peter is standing at the very edge, dwarfed by the shadow of T’Challa’s plane.

“You mind telling me what that was all about?” Bucky says to Steve, quiet, so no one else can hear.

“I have an idea,” Steve answers, clearly still very tense. “I just hope I’m wrong.”

Bucky regards him thoughtfully. “Now is colossally not the time or place, I’m guessing.”

Steve barks out a humorless laugh. “You have no idea.”

“Well,” Bucky shrugs, nudging the other man with his elbow. “Cheer up, Stevie. It’ll work out.”

“Hmm.”

“I need your head in the game,” he says. “Peter does.”

A guilty sigh leaves the man’s lips. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m just—stressed.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

“I still think this is the right thing,” Steve says. “I still think T’Challa is doing us an incredible

favor. I'm just… stressed. About everything."

"I think we're all feeling that, in varying degrees." He gives the man a look, firm but not unkind. "Stressed is fine. Just don't shut down on me. I need you to make sure Tony is sleeping every night and eating something besides organic coffee beans so he can take care of my kid."

A wry grin spreads across Steve's handsome face. "I'll watch over them, Buck. I promise."

"I love you," Bucky says, before he can worry if that's a weird thing to say, here and now of all places and times. Steve looks at him sharply, startled, mouth agape in shock, but his eyes are a little misty, and he doesn't look uncomfortable despite the breathless look on his face, so Bucky figures it was fine.

Probably.

When they reach the end of the dock, Steve pulls him into a hug so tight Bucky swears he can hear his bones creak. He buries his face in the other man's neck, breathes in his familiar, comforting scent, and lets the embrace say all the little things he could never find the words for.

When they pull away, Steve cradles his face and says, "I'll be waiting for you, Buck."

Bucky smiles and kisses him, hand tight on the back of his head, his grip gentle.

"I'll see you soon, Stevie," he promises as he pulls away.

And turns back to Peter.

The boy isn't looking at him. He's staring up at T'Challa's plane, gently wading in the calm waters. His eyes are wet but his cheeks are dry, and when Bucky steps up beside him, he fully expects the boy to break down and beg him not to get on board.

But Peter looks over at him and says, "Have a safe flight, Dad."

For a moment, Bucky's heart stops, thinking he's truly hurt Peter beyond repair, for him to say a thing like that—to change so suddenly, from the small child who would cling to him at even the smallest thought of Bucky leaving, to this unfamiliar young man who could say goodbye like it's no big deal. Bucky momentarily drowns in the guilt of thinking how badly he's clearly hurt his son.

But then he sees it.

He looks closer and he sees how hard Peter's fingers are digging into the material of Bucky's bag. How tightly he's holding his whole body, like it might crumble apart at the smallest touch. How defensive his posture is, turned away from Bucky, distant—but not disdainful. Held back. Deliberately, consciously restrained.

Peter's lower lip is still trembling, his eyes still glossy with unshed tears, and Bucky sees. He sees how close Peter is to flinging himself into his dad's arms and begging him to stay. How hard Peter is fighting to be mature about this, to keep his head up, to not make this any harder than it needs to be.

And God, does it make Bucky want to fucking bawl.

Because Peter knows. He knows that neither of them wants this, that Bucky doesn't want to leave him behind, that he doesn't want to get on that plane and watch the thing he loves most in all the

world get further and further away. Peter knows this is Bucky's absolute last resort.

So he doesn't beg, or sob, or cling to him desperately, refusing to let him leave like a child.

Even though he clearly wants to.

Ironically, it's Bucky who clutches Peter to him and almost confesses that he can't do it, he can't, he can't let him go.

But Peter's trying. He's trying to be grown-up and let Bucky do the right thing.

So Bucky kisses his cheek, cradles his face and says, "I love you more than you will ever know, kid." He tries and fails to keep the tears in, but still manages to smile, pressing their foreheads together. "You're the best thing that ever happened to me. Wait for me, Peter. I swear I will come home to you as soon as I can."

"I love you too, Dad," Peter says, his voice unwavering, which is clearly a struggle. His legs are shaking. His hands, when they come up to gently hold Bucky's wrists, are pale and cold. "I… I'll be waiting. So don't forget your promise." He closes his eyes and bumps their foreheads together. "I'm… I'm really grateful to you for being my dad."

"That's good, kiddo, 'cause I'm planning to be your dad forever."

Peter opens his eyes and smiles.

Bucky smiles back, holds his son a moment longer, and lets him go.

And an explosive blast tears through the serene quiet of the woods.

The three of them startle and look back toward the house, stunned at the sight of smoke billowing from the roof. Steve instantly moves to check it out, but pauses when Iron Man jets into the sky, not pausing or even turning to look at them as he blasts over the horizon and out of sight.

"What the hell?" Bucky says.

Steve doesn't answer, just stares, dumbstruck, as T'Challa steps through the doors. He looks impassive, if a little tired, and not panicked or concerned in the slightest.

"What was that about?" Bucky asks when the man reaches them. Steve still hasn't said a word, his gaze shifting between the back of T'Challa's head and the plume of smoking still rising from the house.

"Something that was a long time coming," T'Challa says, his voice giving absolutely nothing away. "It would be best not to dwell on it for the moment. What's done is done."

"Is Mr. Stark okay?" Peter asks.

"Is the house on fire?" Bucky adds.

T'Challa gently takes his shoulder, using what Bucky can only describe as his King Voice as he says, "We have to be going, my friend. Captain Rogers can handle things here."

Bucky looks over at Steve, who seems to snap out of whatever internal spiral he was lost in, worry practically rolling off of him in waves. "Steve?"

Taking a deep breath, Steve forces a smile onto his face, walks over and takes Bucky's hands in his

own.

“Go, Buck,” he says gently. “I’ve got this.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, unconvinced. “If you’re sure…”

“I’m sure.”

Bucky looks down at his son, staring at nothing with that faraway look in his eyes, and thinks to himself, *I wish I could say the same*.

T’Challa’s hand drops from his shoulder. “It’s time to go.”

Bucky kisses Steve one last time, leans down and presses his forehead to his son’s, stands and promises them both, “I’ll be back. I promise,” and steps aboard the plane.

He takes his seat, waving to the man he loves and the son he would kill and die for standing together on the dock, and watches as the plane starts to move, faster and faster, until it breaks away from the water and into the clear mountain air.

Then he looks down at the dock and succumbs to a fit of sobs when he sees Peter, collapsed to his knees, crying desperately with Steve’s arms wrapped around him.

*Oh God*, he thinks, blind with panic, *I’m sorry, Peter. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.*

T’Challa, as gracious as ever, bestows some privacy on him by returning to the cockpit. Bucky manages to keep his breakdown mostly silent as he curls up against the window, crying fitfully, praying against all logic that his son can feel—can know—how badly Bucky wishes it didn’t have to come to this.

His shuddering breaths are interrupted by a gentle, comforting beep. Beside him, his backpack wiggles, and Bucky knows that familiar binary sound, unsurprised when he unzips the bag and finds Orbie peering up at him.

He manages a huff of laughter and takes the robot into his hands. “Hey, buddy.”

Orbie chirps happily. Bucky’s fingers trace its outer shell where, only days ago, he had crushed and mangled the robot’s body almost beyond recognition. There’s no sign of any of that damage now. The robot looks good as new. It even seems to have forgiven Bucky, as if the whole thing never happened. Nobody to remember the horror and grief and guilt of that moment except Bucky himself.

How familiar a thing that is.

“I know this is the right thing,” he confesses, confiding in Orbie’s big black eyes that always remind him of his son’s. “I know it is. But God, that doesn’t make it easy. I—” he sobs again, curling over the robot in his lap, crying helplessly. “I want to see him. I want to see my kid. God, Steve, I don’t know if I can do this. I—I want to see my kid.”

After a moment, Orbie lets out a quiet, affirmative beep.

Bucky looks up when he feels its metal body shift. He watches the curved plates move and change, revealing the little black screen hidden below its shell. Orbie’s ear-speakers rotate to project up at him, and the screen lifts so it’s easier to see, and after a moment, a video starts to play.

A video of Peter.

He's down in Tony's workshop, sitting across the table from Tony himself. Bucky assumes it was Friday who recorded the footage, judging by the birdseye view of the two sitting across from each other. He wonders, for a moment, if this video was something Peter saved onto Orbie's harddrive, or if Orbie accessed Friday's archives to stream it to him directly.

That train of thought ends when Tony speaks up. "This is a safe space, Pete. Don't be scared. You can tell me if you need help. That's why I'm here."

Peter looks nervous as hell, and Bucky recognizes the scene all of a sudden: the day Tony gave Peter his new Spider-Man suit, when Bucky had barged in on them. The day Tony begrudgingly called Bucky Peter's parent for the first time.

This footage, he realizes with a slap of surprise, is what must've taken place before he barged in.

He leans closer to the screen and listens.

"Mr. Stark," Peter says quietly, "Please don't take this the wrong way, but, um, you're sort of the last person I'm going to feel safe around right now."

Tony hides his surprise much better than Bucky. "Why is that, Peter?"

Peter's arms tighten where they're crossed over his chest. "Because you're trying to take my dad away from me."

"Okay, I hear you—but you have to understand, kid, that guy out there? He's not the friendly drifter you think he is. I get that you two have… bonded, but he's not your dad. He's trouble with a capital T. He's probably the most dangerous person you'll ever meet, even if you continue being Spider-Man."

"You're wrong."

Tony leans back in his chair, nothing but confident. "Enlighten me."

Peter exhales and runs a hand through his unruly hair. Bucky's thumb gently traces the movement, wishing he could do the same.

"I know about his past," Peter says softly. "I know why you're so worried about letting me stay with him. But… he's not dangerous, Mr. Stark. Not to me. I… can't really explain it. But I know he would never hurt me."

Tony sighs and rubs the back of his head. "Kid…"

"Just listen," Peter pleads. "You said I could talk. So please, Mr. Stark, just listen."

Tony holds his hands up in surrender. "You've got the floor, kid. I'm listening."

"I…" Peter says, frowning, trying to formulate the words. He looks up, past Tony, to that distant, faraway spot he always focuses on when he's overthinking something.

"Mr. Stark," he says, very quiet, "do you know what it feels like to be alone?"

Tony doesn't reply, though he gestures for Peter to continue after a long, silent moment.

"I don't mean, like, lonely, or friendless, or single," Peter says. "I mean *alone.* Do you know what

that's like? To know that… in the whole world, at any given time, not… not a single person is thinking of you?"

Tony's face falls.

"After my aunt and uncle died, and the foster system gave up on me, there was a time when… when I was alone. And when I was, I knew that it didn't matter. It didn't matter if I lived or died. Nobody would know, either way. If I just… vanished, one day, out of thin air… nobody would know I was ever there at all. I was invisible. I had, literally, nothing."

Bucky's heart lodges in his throat. He has never heard Peter sound like this.

This crushing, inescapable hopelessness.

"I had nothing, Mr. Stark. Not even the comfort of knowing someone, somewhere, was thinking of me. I didn't even take up space in other people's minds. I had no reason to… I had no reason to be alive. I wasn't suicidal, I just… had nothing. I had no one. I was clinging to my schoolwork and my dream of being Spider-Man because I didn't have anything else to attach to. Not even a home to feel safe in."

He expects the boy to cry, at admitting something so painful, so clearly traumatic. But Peter's voice, though quiet, is even and calm. Detached. His eyes are distant, but dry. He's holding himself protectively… but he's loose. He looks… wrong.

It's all wrong.

This isn't the boy he knows.

"The night I met Bucky," Peter says, "I had been wandering the streets, aimlessly, for hours. I wasn't looking for trouble, I just… I wanted someone to see me. I wanted someone to look at me. I wanted someone to talk to me, and think of me, even if they didn't really care, it didn't matter. I just wanted to know I existed to someone else. That if I died, without warning like my parents and my aunt and uncle, that someone, anyone, would be aware of it."

Bucky thinks back to the boy he met that night. The hopeful, cheerful, bubbly sound of Peter's timid voice. How eager he had been to follow Bucky home. How lively he seemed to be for a kid who almost just got shot in the face.

How Bucky had slammed the door on him without a single word.

What did Peter feel, in that moment? When the only person to have acknowledged him in weeks pushed him away so vehemently?

He's scared to find out, but in spite of himself, Bucky continues watching.

"I ran into a guy who had been mugged, and I chased the muggers down this alleyway, trying to get his wallet back for him. But I… something was off. Normally, I can, like, sense danger. I have a sixth sense that tells me when there's trouble, like a built-in warning system, but when I was fighting these guys, Mr. Stark… it was silent. It was dead silent."

Bucky's entire body goes cold.

"You know?" Peter says, smiling, but now there are tears soaking his face. "For a second, I thought I was already dead. Like even my own senses didn't know I was there. That I mattered so little, my own body didn't think it was worth the effort of keeping me alive."

“How could you ever think that?” Bucky whispers, dampening Orbie’s screen with his own falling tears.

“One of the muggers pulled a gun on me, and I froze, because I was certain—really, Mr. Stark, I was positive—that this was it. This was exactly what I’d been scared of, and it was inevitable now. I just… shut down. I didn’t even have regrets, really, in that split-second. I just froze. I wanted it over with. I was so… I was so tired of being alone.”

“Peter—” Tony tries to say, but the boy shakes his head. He isn’t done. And Bucky is terrified to hear what he has to say next, but he needs to. He has to know.

“Mr. Stark,” Peter says, wiping his wet face. “Have you ever had someone tell you to listen to your gut? Like, if someone gives you a bad feeling, you should listen to it? Even if it doesn’t seem to really make sense?”

Bucky can hear the confusion in Tony’s voice as he answers, “Yeah?”

Peter smiles, hugs himself tighter. “The guy had a gun in my face, and he pulled the trigger. I really thought I was already dead. But suddenly, there was… this… this guy. In front of me. He came out of nowhere, and I didn’t hear or feel him approach us. It was like he materialized just to save my life.”

The boy sobs, but he’s grinning, he’s grinning that familiar sunshine grin and Bucky loves him, loves him with every fiber of his being, loves him more than words could possibly express.

“And when I looked at him, I just… knew, Mr. Stark. It was that gut feeling, only—instead of warning me to stay away, it was screaming, *you’re safe now.* It was the opposite of my Spider-sense. Instead of danger, all my senses were telling me that I was going to be okay. Finally, after months of searching… someone found me. Someone saw me. And he helped me." The boy wipes his face, his smile fading into a more serious look. "I don’t care what anyone else says about him. I felt good about Bucky the first moment I saw him.”

He doesn’t care if T’Challa can hear the guttural sob that rips its way from his throat; he couldn’t keep it in if he gave it everything he had.

“I know what Hydra made him do,” Peter says. “I know some of their conditioning is still affecting him. And I know what he’s capable of. But none of that changes what he is to me, Mr. Stark. Bucky took me in. He saved me. He took care of me, and he listened to the things I had to say. He looked for me when I was late coming home. He scolded me when I was reckless. He worried about me. He *wanted* me. And he became my dad, when I needed that from him. I really don’t care if you and the rest of the world think he’s dangerous, because being around Bucky is really the only time I ever feel safe.”

And Bucky had left him.

Just got on a plane and left him on that fucking dock.

There’s more to the video—Tony surrendering, cheering Peter up, presenting him with his new state-of-the-art suit—but Bucky isn’t watching anymore. The screen goes black a few moments later, and Bucky’s confronted by the sight of his own face, drenched in tears. He watches helplessly as Orbie reforms itself, the screen covered once again by its outer shell, its eyes and ears sliding back into place, good as new. The robot gives him a small, hopeful beep, and Bucky sobs and holds it to his chest in a tight hug, cradling it, biting back the urge to scream.

“Thank you,” he sobs out, though the guilt is heavy enough to crush him so badly, he feels like he might never stand up again. “Wait for me, Peter. I’m going to come home to you. I swear I will.”

He wonders if Peter still believes in his promises, after he broke the only one that ever mattered.

And yet, Peter had never held that against him. He hadn’t once accused Bucky of going back on his word, or thrown his words back in his face. No, in the end, he hadn’t even asked Bucky to stay, though Bucky could tell he was dying to. He just held his tongue and told him to have a safe flight, as he stood there and watched his whole life get on a plane and leave him.

He thinks of that last sight, of Peter, collapsed at the end of the dock, and bites the back of his fist to stop himself from screaming.

*I’m sorry, Peter. I’m so fucking sorry.*

The guilt eats at him. But there’s more, too. Beneath the guilt, the self-loathing, the grief, there’s stubborn, bullheaded, foolhardy determination. Bucky lets Orbie encase his metal hand and clenches his fist, jaw tightening as he wills away the tears.

*I’ll come back to you as soon as I can,* he vows, head tipped against the plane window. *I promise.*

He doesn’t get a chance to see much of Wakanda, though truth be told, he wasn’t expecting to see any of it at first.

After brief introductions with T’Challa’s head scientist—his sister, who reminds Bucky way too much of Tony—he’s led to his new cryo-freeze chamber, prepped and briefed on what to expect.

T’Challa stands with him as he’s helped inside the container. “I will be waiting for you when you wake up,” he assures, and Bucky smiles at him through the glass window of the door.

“Commence freezing in five… four… three…”

Bucky takes a deep breath.

“…Two…”

Holds it.

“…One.”

And lets it go.

# Trials and Tribulations

Some part of Bucky, if he's being truly honest with himself, had expected to be frozen for years.

He underestimated T'Challa, really, when it comes down to it. He never would have assumed that, only two months after he went into cryo-freeze, the King would be waking him up with good news.

And really, it was some of the best news Bucky had ever heard.

Princess Shuri is, without a doubt, the smartest person Bucky has ever met. The technology she designed, engineered and perfected to remove the trigger words from his head makes every engine he's ever worked on seem like a kids' toy in comparison. He doesn't understand a word of the eager rundown she gives him as he's hooked into the machine, but her infectious enthusiasm is familiar and comforting enough to soothe his anxieties.

He closes his eyes, listens to the steady hum of the machine powering on, and thinks of his son.

It had been the first thing he had asked about when T'Challa unfroze him.

"He is doing well," T'Challa had said, draping the thermo-blanket over his shoulders. "Captain Rogers tells me he is thriving in school, and has more good days than bad ones as of late. I know he misses you terribly."

"Steve was the one to tell you that?" Bucky had asked. "Not Tony?"

"No." T'Challa's face gave nothing away, but Bucky got the feeling there was something the man wasn't telling him. "I know they returned to New York and are staying at Avengers Tower, but I believe Tony has had his hands full."

"With the Accords?"

T'Challa's voice had held a touch of finality as he said, "Among other things."

He still answered every question Bucky could think to ask about Peter, trying to catch up on every moment he had missed in cryo-sleep, but there had been little time for much else. To his surprise, the trial to exonerate James Buchanan Barnes was already well under way. T'Challa's legal team had already flown to New York and had been in court for weeks already, presenting the first half of their defense to the jury.

Hence why, mere hours after being woken up, Bucky finds himself hooked up to Princess Shuri's latest feat of technology, listening intently to every sound it makes as it scans his brain.

At least he isn't strapped down.

T'Challa already warned him there would be no time for much else until the trial is over. After the trigger words are removed, Bucky will need to undergo a long and arduous series of tests—first for Shuri, then his own defense lawyers, and then the prosecution. Between those tests, as per Wakanda's agreement with UN, he will be held in a secure holding cell to await his day in court.

The cell, he learns after his first session in Shuri's "brain purifier," is as high-tech as the rest of the princess's lab. It's a square little room, all white, behind a heavy metal door that has to be at least a foot thick.

He knows he's under constant supervision here. The UN must have demanded it. There's a camera in every corner, and they follow his movements, honed in on him like they're being controlled manually. They don't stop, not even when T'Challa visits him, which is often.

Bucky thinks the King might be giving a subtle fuck-you to whoever demanded that Bucky be locked up each time he comes to visit, because he never demands that Bucky be restrained, the way the UN representatives do. He sits with Bucky on his cot, casually, to show he feels completely unconcerned. He'll bring him meals and they'll eat together, sharing news with him of the outside world, news of the Avengers.

He doesn't mention Peter.

Bucky isn't allowed to ask.

It's for the best, he knows, but the separation is tearing him apart. He is watched constantly for any possible flaw; any slip-up, any snag in the story his defense lawyers have spun in court. The UN doesn't know about Peter. They don't know that Bucky spent the last year living in Queens with an orphan child.

And, if Bucky wants to keep Peter out of this whole mess, it has to stay that way.

It makes it hard. He can't make any move that acknowledges Peter's existence, not even to confide in his friend. The closest thing he has to his son in this sterile white cell is Orbie, who stays wrapped around his arm, hidden in plain sight from the cameras. Occasionally, Bucky will place his left hand over his heart, and through some vague, unpredictable programming he doesn't understand, Orbie will clue in to what he wants and hum softly, in short, gentle beats, mimicking the heartbeat of the one who made him.

He wonders how T'Challa managed to negotiate that he was allowed to keep his arm, but regardless of what the man had to do, Bucky is grateful.

He's grateful for a lot of things, when he thinks about it. He's grateful only two months have passed, and not a decade, like he secretly feared. He's grateful T'Challa is just audacious enough to treat a global terrorist like him as a close friend in front of the entire world. He's grateful for Shuri's help, and for the progress he's made because of it, and that, from everything T'Challa and his lawyers tell him, the trial seems to be going well.

He's grateful that, on the other side of the world, his child and his partner are thinking of him.

It takes five sessions with Shuri's machine before she declares that Bucky is trigger-word free.

The testing he undergoes to confirm this is long and arduous, not to mention repetitive. It's one thing to run through the routine with Shuri, who he has come to trust quite deeply in the three weeks he's been awake, and another entirely to go through it with the doctor T'Challa insisted he have, or the half a dozen other medical professionals sent by the UN to vet him, or, worse yet, the lawyers.

But Bucky manages.

He gets better about it, too. By the fourth attempt, he hardly flinches at all when he hears the words. By the sixth, his jaw barely tightens. On the ninth, T'Challa insists they leave him

unrestrained as they read them out.

He'll need to be perfect when they test him in court. The less he reacts, the less he lets the trauma and anxiety overwhelm him, the better it will look to the jury.

The doctor T'Challa assigns to him focuses mainly on that goal, above all else. She meets with him three times a week for one-on-one sessions, a trauma specialist with expertise in psychotherapy, and Bucky can't help but wonder what Tony will say, when Bucky tells him he finally got the therapy he was so adamant about. The thought cheers him up.

Thoughts of what Steve would do if he were here cheer him up, too, even though he knows the man would be pissed. He wouldn't be as tactful or respectful as T'Challa in his protests of all the UN's demands, and while that would make everything harder—might even jeopardize the whole thing, depending on how snarly Steve would get—picturing his pissed-off, tough-guy face does make the shittier moments of this ordeal a little easier to bear.

But the only thing that gets him through the truly harrowing moments—the moments when he's strapped to a chair, surrounded by men who want to see him executed, above all else—when the trigger words are echoing in his head, and he's consumed by terror that they might still hold some power over him—the only thing that gets him through are thoughts of Peter.

The sun beyond the storm clouds. That's what Peter is, in New York, waiting for him. Sometimes Bucky thinks of Before, comforting himself with those cherished memories of their shithole apartment, of teaching Peter how to cook, of training him, of lying awake at night, staring at the loveseat, watching the gentle rise and fall of the boy's chest as he slept, safe and sound. There's comfort in those memories, tangible things to cling to in the darkest moments of this process.

And sometimes, when he needs that extra boost of determination, when he's exhausted and tempted to give up, certain the mountain ahead of him is too steep to climb, he thinks of After. He thinks of being back home before summer is over. He thinks of going out, no disguise needed, walking through Central Park as himself, as Bucky Barnes, a free man. He thinks of taking Peter to play catch on the diamond. Of forcing Steve to brave Coney Island with him like when they were kids.

He thinks of the little things, mostly. A quiet life with his partner and son. Helping Peter with his homework in the evenings. Introducing Steve to Frank and Sharon. Of the apartment the three of them will share, decorated to the nines with every knick-knack and science project Peter has ever brought home. He thinks of their home, a warm, safe place. He thinks of taking trips upstate to go horseback riding again, their small, unorthodox, perfect family, camping out underneath the stars. He thinks of the life the three of them will have, and he has hope, and the mountaintop suddenly doesn't feel quite so far away.

Whenever Bucky feels like he can't do this, he thinks of Peter, of the boy he plans to someday call his own, and is reminded that he can.

That he has to.

Unexpectedly, the thing that haunts him the most isn't the laundry list of people he's killed, even though he's remembering more and more of them every day—not all, Shuri's machine didn't restore every memory, and despite his therapist's best attempts, there are still many gaps that remain blank. The hundreds of people he's killed over the years is a stain that he knows will never

wash out, but for his part, he's made his peace with it.

Some of it is partly thanks to his therapy. He hasn't necessarily *forgiven* himself, but… he's made a start. It sounds less like bullshit to his own ears when he tells himself that he is not responsible for what Hydra made him do. He can't say he *fully* believes those words… but he doesn't fight them as hard as he used to. It's not much, but at least it's something.

So his bloody past isn't the thing that keeps awake at night, most nights, lying in his cell and trying to think of his family back home, waiting for him.

The thing that haunts him is the family he already lost, the one Hydra ensured he would not remember.

Becca.

His baby sister.

It had been a shock when that particular block was moved. He didn't quite faint, but it was a near thing, and he suspects he has Shuri entirely to thank for the fact that he remained conscious. This is what Steve had been trying to tell him. The thing he'd been so afraid to speak of, after what happened in the gym. Becca Barnes, Bucky's only living family, his favorite person in all the world. The girl he raised after his parents died. That spirited little rugrat who idolized him.

Who watched him fly off to war.

And died believing he was never coming back.

He had asked T'Challa almost immediately for *something.* Something of Becca Barnes that had to still exist, somewhere—a photo, a relative, a grave—anything. Anything that Bucky could see, could hold in his hands and remember her by. He had practically begged for it the moment the shock wore off.

The next day, T'Challa brought him exactly what he wanted.

In his cell, constantly under surveillance, unable to speak of or acknowledge the family he has waiting for him in New York, Bucky still has this. Images, texts, pages and pages of things T'Challa was able to find—archived, Bucky guesses, because of his connection to Captain America, and by association, Becca's connection.

Pages and pages of archived letters they exchanged while Bucky was overseas. Not the originals, no, just typed-up copies—but he remembers the words vaguely enough to know they're authentic. Becca's letters to him. A brainy little kid who was twice as articulate as her thick-headed big brother.

He remembers that she was the first person to ever call him "Bucky."

He remembers almost all of it, when he flips through the pages and finds one filled with photographs. Old, scanned copies of his childhood photos. Black and white family portraits that he can hardly remember posing for.

They'd had money, his family. He can remember a large print of the four of them that hung above the hearth in their great room, proudly displaying the Barnes household to all who entered.

He remembers Becca's face.

The one photo of her, taken at his mother's insistence, he's sure, is taped to his wall beside his cot, and most nights he stares at it as he waits for sleep to take him.

Her mop of floppy brown curls. Her big dark eyes. That mischievous little grin that never fooled him, not once. Her pigtails, how she made him tie her hair up in them every single day. The way she clung to him when she fell and fractured her knee. Rocking her to sleep after their mother died, though she was too old for it, and holding her up that long made his arms ache.

How he did it anyway, every night, without fail.

Teaching her to play catch when she got jealous he was spending so much time with Steve. Teaching her how to ride a bike. Taking her for ice cream. To Coney Island. Making sure she was fitting in at school, that the boys weren't teasing her, or the girls excluding her. Offering to help her with her homework even though she never needed him to and wasn't shy about telling him as much.

His baby sister.

She lived a long life, but didn't marry or have children. Bucky prays that, in spite of that, she found her family the way he found his. With every fiber of his being, he clenches his wet eyes shut and prays she found that place she could call home, desperately trying to block out Peter's words echoing sadly in his head: *Do you know what it feels like to be alone? To know that… in the whole world, at any given time, not… not a single person is thinking of you?*

Did anyone think of Becca, after Bucky fell, and Steve crashed into the ice?

Was she alone, the way Peter was?

Did she die like that?

Bucky lets himself sob. He holds it together for everything else—the therapy, the tests, the interrogations, the isolation, the inability to ask about, see or hear from his kid—all of it, he keeps it together. But not with this. With this, he lets the dam break, as often and as violently as it wants to. Becca was the center of his entire world. She needed him. She depended on him. And he didn't even know she had ever existed when she died. It was Peter's greatest fear. And it had happened to his kid sister.

At least, unlike Peter, Bucky can discuss Becca in therapy. Some days that's all he can bear to talk about. Others, he flinches away from the subject like a scared animal. It's not an easy thing to predict, what kind of turmoil he'll be faced with when he hears her name, but like with most things in his current life, Bucky isn't given much choice.

It may be a tad naïve, but Bucky genuinely feels hopeful the day he is finally extradited back to the US.

Even with the armed security detail, the impenetrable military plane, the vibranium cuff tying his right hand to his belt, having his left arm—and Orbie—confiscated begrudgingly by T'Challa—somehow, he still feels hopeful. He's warned time and time again that this is the hard part, but he just can't see it: a weight's been lifted off his shoulders, and naïve or not, he's going to enjoy the momentary relief.

The jury has come to their decision.

James Buchanan Barnes is not responsible for Hydra's—for the Winter Soldier's—crimes.

It means, at the very least, that execution is off the table, which is no small victory. T'Challa warns him over and over again that this is the hard part—this is the true test. The second half of this trial, to determine whether or not Bucky Barnes (through no fault of his own, of course) is a danger to society. If he should be allowed to live a free life, after all the things he's unwillingly done. If he's a threat to himself or others. If he can be trusted.

The prosecution had been watching him like vultures for weeks, circling, waiting to make the kill, for Bucky to slip up, get angry, show any sign of instability that they could point to and say, *See? He's an animal, not a man. He can't ever be allowed to walk freely like one.*

It's their entire ballgame, now. Label him as dangerous—a victim, yeah, sure, but a dangerous one—and lock him up as far away from civil society as he can get.

"They're going to try to push you," his lawyer tells him, preparing him for his first day in court. "They'll be intentionally shitty, Barnes. You name it—insults, jabs, cruel jokes—they're going to want you to react. To get angry. Play the sympathy card, but don't get hysterical. No blubbering. You have to be composed, but still human and relatable. Think you can do that?"

"Yes," he says. He can. This is exactly what he's been preparing for—the jury's opinion of him, now, is everything. It will be the difference between freedom and confinement. They have to believe he is well enough to live among them, after his defense lawyers worked so tirelessly to prove he has a right to.

*Almost there,* he assures himself. *It's almost over, Pete.*

His holding cell in New York is a pretty significant downgrade from his one in Wakanda, but Bucky's glad enough to be back on American soil that he doesn't really care. He's allowed to keep his folder, of Becca's letters and their family photos, of the address of her gravesite, and between that and the knowledge that it's almost over, he doesn't need much else.

At least, he thought he didn't.

As they're outside of the courtroom—Bucky, his team of lawyers, and T'Challa—waiting to be called in, Bucky hears a familiar voice call his name and realizes, instantly, he needed something much more.

He turns and grins, tired, but relieved more than he can express, at Steve's smiling face.

"*Buck.*"

"Hey, Stevie."

The guards look a little intimidated, but they don't stop Steve from surging forward and crushing Bucky in a hug. Bucky can't hug back, one-armed with his hand fastened to his belt, but he can still lean heavily into the other man's chest, and it's good enough for them.

"I've missed you," Steve breathes out.

Bucky presses into his shoulder. They have to pretend it's been much longer than it truly has. Despite how badly he wants to, Bucky can't ask where Peter is, if he's well, if he's been doing all right the past three months. But somehow, when he pulls away and looks into Steve's confident,

steady blue eyes, he knows the answers. “I’ve missed you, too.”

“You ready for the big day?”

Bucky smiles. “First of many, I’ve been warned.”

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. “But it’s almost over, Buck.”

Bucky takes a deep breath, nodding.

It’s almost over.

The first day in court, Bucky is restrained in front of the jury and forced to listen to the prosecution read his trigger words aloud in clear, clipped Russian.

He maybe plays it up a little too much, but as his lawyer said, his performance has to be perfect. So Bucky holds still and listens to the words fly at him like stray bullets. He keeps his face calm, but not robotic. Towards the end, he lets the barest hint of PTSD-related worry bleed into his expression, and when it’s over, and the last word is read loudly and with purpose in the silent courtroom, Bucky embraces the sappy, relieved grin that spreads across his face.

It’s maybe a little dramatic, but it gets the job done. He makes eye contact with a few of the jurors, knowing his smile is infectious, practically glowing when a few of them cautiously smile back. *That’s right,* he thinks, playing the room, turning to look at Steve and T’Challa in their seats. *This is my victory, and you’re all celebrating with me whether you like it or not.*

Steve looks ready to roll his eyes at him, but T’Challa gives him an approving nod.

He passes the first test, but it’s the second one that really matters.

Taking the stand.

His own lawyers question him first, and it’s the sort of softball questioning he’s prepared for: Describe what it was like “waking up” in DC. What were you thinking. What were you feeling. Did you have contact with anyone from Hydra in the two years it took for the Avengers to find you. Why didn’t you seek out the Avengers for help.

Why didn’t you reach out to Steve.

Bucky’s rehearsed his answers in his head a thousand times, but he knows he can’t let them *sound* rehearsed. They have to sound authentic. Genuine. Sympathetic, but not concerning. For the most part, he succeeds, and manages to toe the line between sincere and manufactured responses. He tells the truth, only omitting the vital pieces, the ones no one can know about, protectively keeping every mention of his son to himself.

As far he can tell, the jury, for the most part, looks convinced. Hydra was everywhere, and Bucky, a good man, was trying to keep the world safe from the Winter Soldier by keeping as low to the ground as possible. Most, thankfully, seem to believe them.

And then the prosecution takes the floor.

“Now, Mr. Barnes,” the lawyer, an older, blond, smarmy man leading the opposition’s line of

questioning says, “Once more, can you tell us what happened the night that Brock Rumlow—Crossbones, as he’s known in *the industry*— found you?”

Bucky frowns. Of all the places he thought they would start, he really didn’t think it’d be there. “Rumlow cornered me and attempted to trigger the Winter Soldier’s mindset. I was able to overpower him before he could finish.”

The lawyer hums, thoughtfully. “And how did you manage that?”

Bucky stops short.

“This man—Brock Rumlow, a spy for Hydra and one of the many SHIELD agents who turned out to be a double-agent—he was your handler, correct? During your time as the Winter Soldier?”

“…Yes.”

“So, professionally, it was this man’s job to ‘wake’ the Winter Soldier, for lack of a better term, and command him, would you say that’s correct?”

“Primarily,” Bucky says, “yes.”

“And yet,” the man smiles at him, “despite having you *alone,* secluded, and two-thirds of the way into activating the Winter Soldier’s mindset, by your own account, you were—for the first time in seventy years, keep in mind—able to overpower your handler.”

*Don’t react,* he thinks, his inner voice sounding, strangely, like T’Challa. *They’re pushing you. You knew this would happen. Your reaction is what’s most important. Stay calm.*

“Yes,” he says, simply. “I was able to overpower him.”

“Hmm,” the man says, looking fake-impressed. “Well, that was pretty lucky, wasn’t it? You just… overpowered him. Just like that. Something you weren’t able to do, even when he, and other handlers in the past, ordered the Winter Soldier to murder innocent people.”

“The situation was different,” Bucky says. Firm, but not argumentative. Expressive, but not emotional. “Hydra never deployed *me* . The Winter Soldier was always ‘ *activated’* long before I was allowed to leave their bases. I didn’t have a chance to fight back when I was conscious enough to realize what was at stake. They didn’t give me one.”

Displeasure crosses the man’s gaunt face. “Mr. Barnes, again, if you would be so kind, please enlighten us as to *how,* exactly, you managed to overpower Mr. Rumlow.”

The echo of Peter’s piercing, agonized scream lingers at the memory. Bucky takes a deep breath, remembering to appear sympathetic, and exhales softly as he says, “It felt like I was only moments away from being put under their control again.” His own lawyer nods at him, and he continues, “It took everything I had, but I was desperate to escape from him.” Not a lie. Just an omission of truth. They must not find out about Peter. He clears his throat. “Just before he could finish saying the words, I threw myself at him and punched him in the face as hard as I could.”

“How many times?”

Bucky tries very hard not to glance over at the jurors. “I wasn’t counting.” When the lawyer narrows his eyes at him, he adds, “I knew that if I gave him another chance to speak, he would finish using their trigger words on me. I didn’t want to be violent, but there wasn’t any other feasible option. I punched him several times until he was knocked unconscious, and it was safe to

stop."

But if it weren't for Peter, Bucky knows that's not what would have happened.

He would have beaten Rumlow to death like a dog, and this entire trial would be going very differently.

"You didn't want to be violent," the lawyer repeats slowly, as though highlighting the obvious lie in Bucky's speech. "Yet, when Brock Rumlow's unconscious body was found dumped in a parking lot, he was, according to the ER doctor who treated him, *perilously* close to death." He eyes Bucky critically, a haughty tone in his voice. "Mr. Barnes, even in your extremely abnormal circumstances, there is a limit to self-defense. I have to wonder, as I'm sure so many of us are: do you know where that is?"

"I do," Bucky says. He meets the man's eyes, careful to school his features. *This isn't a fight,* his expression says. *It's not me versus you. We're all friends here, getting to the bottom of this together. Just one big team all on the same side.*

At least, he hopes that's what his face says. It's entirely possible he isn't nearly as good at this shit as he thinks he is and his true feelings are on display for everyone to see: *I'm not taking your fucking bait, dickhead.*

"Rumlow survived because I didn't want to kill him. Once he was unconscious, I took him to the nearest hospital and left him propped up against an ambulance where I knew paramedics would find and help him. I even waited on a nearby rooftop to make sure he was found. I didn't cause him more harm than I absolutely had to—" *for my son's sake* "—even after everything he and his organization did to me. I…"

Just a little. He lets the truth out, just a little, just the smallest crack of emotion in his voice. The barest hint of his true feelings.

"I… *hate* the violent things I was forced to do under their mind-control. More times than I can count, since the day I escaped from them in DC, I've thought to myself that, if it could have prevented all this bloodshed, then I wish I really had died when I fell off that train like the world thought I did."

He can't meet Steve's eyes after he says it.

The lawyer, on the other hand, looks absolutely pissed.

Bucky lets a small, sad smile cover his face. *Thanks for the smoking gun, pal.* "Despite what Rumlow did to me, I didn't want to hurt him. Despite the trauma of what Hydra forced me to do, I don't want to hurt myself, either. I want nothing to do with violence. This courtroom is as close as I want to come to another fight for as long as I live."

From his seat, T'Challa gives him a victorious smile.

*This trial is as good as over,* that smile says.

On the second day of the trial, all six of Bucky's psychoanalysts are called to the stand.

Including his primary doctor from Wakanda, flown in to present her official assessment of him. It doesn't differ too greatly from the other doctors', even though they each were called in from a different corner of the globe. In her very professional opinion, Bucky Barnes is a gentle, compassionate man who's made remarkable steps in his mental health recovery and is, most importantly, *not* a danger to himself or others.

The prosecution's lawyer looked like someone pissed in his cereal when she told him as much.

In the end, after all their planning, all the work his defense lawyers put into building his case, all the efforts Bucky made to make sure he could charm the jury, it'll be his doctor and her blunt, straight-to-the-point manner of speaking that wins him his trial.

The prosecution questions her, attempting to back her into a corner where she'll be forced to admit that Bucky is capable of great harm, a smirk on the blond lawyer's face as he asks, "Aren't these symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that you've outlined in your assessment just one more reason to believe that Mr. Barnes could be susceptible—if not guaranteed—to developing additional mental health issues that would make him an unpredictable threat to himself or others?"

His doctor, as straight-faced as Bucky's ever seen anyone look, stares the smarmy lawyer down and says, "If we threw people in jail on the basis that they might, potentially, *someday* commit a crime, you would have a lot more peers behind bars, Mr. Landman."

Landman. Right. That's the slimy bastard's name.

Landman's face turns red as a bruised plum. "These are *extenuating* circumstances. The Avengers —"

"Mr. Barnes is not an Avenger," she says. "He's an American citizen who became a prisoner of war. To deny him his right to be free now would be letting the terrorist organization known as Hydra claim one more innocent life."

The lawyer seethes. "He may not be an Avenger, *yet,* but his power—his abilities—"

"Thousands of children are born with the Mutant-X gene in this country every year." Her clipped tone stops him short. "Some with abilities far greater than Bucky Barnes'. They are not arrested the moment those abilities manifest, even though they have the potential to be dangerous. That is something we all possess, Mr. Landman. The law exists to prevent the very prosecution of the innocent that you and your associates are currently trying to ensure. It does not permit us to punish someone who has not yet committed a crime."

Bucky isn't sure what he said or did to have this woman in his corner, but he loves her.

Landman probably doesn't. But Bucky can live with that.

The first day in court was an unexpected success. The second day was an absolute breeze.

The third day is when the other shoe finally drops.

Bucky had tried, really, not to let the hope go to his head. He had done his best not to get carried away thanks to their numerous micro-victories, knowing that the fight isn't over 'til it's over.

But it had been hard. The hope was infectious, and they were all feeling it. After their second day in court, T'Challa had grinned and clapped him on the shoulder so hard that he almost gave Bucky a welt in his excitement. Steve had hugged him like he was trying to make him cough up all his organs and was too happy to care when Bucky gasped out that he couldn't breathe. His representation, most of whom Bucky believed were very serious, straight-laced individuals, actually mentioned going out for a drink to celebrate their inevitable victory.

Bucky had let himself think this trial was practically already over.

But on their third day in court, Landman stands from his seat and says, "The prosecution would like to call Tony Stark to the stand."

Bucky's head snaps up. *Tony?* Here? They haven't seen or spoken to each other since the day Bucky left for Wakanda, and though Bucky had wanted to, he couldn't ask Steve or T'Challa how the man was for all the same reasons he couldn't ask about Peter. The last he'd heard of him was when T'Challa first woke him up, and told him Tony had his hands full finalizing the amendment to the Accords. After that, the chance to ask about his friend hadn't presented itself.

He swivels in his seat and watches Tony approach the stand, immediately struck by two things: the shocked looks on T'Challa and Steve's faces, and…

And the hateful look on Tony's.

Bucky stares after him, confused. Tony's face is dark, unlike anything Bucky has ever seen. Even when they first met, and Tony had misbelieved that Bucky was a dangerous terrorist manipulating an innocent child for his own gain, he had never looked at him like that. He can't keep the questioning look off his face as Tony takes his seat across from him and stares him down, trying, desperately, to figure out what's wrong.

And what the hell the prosecution is planning.

"Mr. Stark," Landman says, his smile beaming, "Thank you for taking the time out of your very busy schedule to join us today. I assure you, this won't take long."

Tony pins him with a flat look.

No retort. No witty remark or condescending joke.

*Tony, what the hell? What happened to you?*

"Mr. Stark, can you describe your relationship with the defendant?"

Tony's cold eyes skim from Steve to Bucky. "I don't have one."

Something in Bucky's gut twists.

"But you recognize him? Are you aware who he is?"

"Trial of the century, broadcasted on every news outlet at every hour of the day? Yeah, I'd say I'm familiar."

*Thank God,* Bucky thinks. *It's still him.*

Something's wrong, but at least it's still Tony.

"I'm curious, Mr. Stark, if I asked him the same question, do you think he would know the

answer?"

What the hell is he playing at?

"You've said my name at least once in every question you've asked, so I'm gonna say yes."

"But do you think he would recognize you? Do you think he would know who you are in your position?"

"He's sitting right there, Socrates, why don't you ask him?"

"So you don't, am I right in assuming that? You don't believe Mr. Barnes would recognize you?"

Tony's glare deepens. His voice is tight. "Probably not—"

The lawyer's smile is sharp enough to cut stone. "How about your father?"

In the stand, Tony's whole body goes very still.

Bucky's mind races.

"Mr. Stark? Do you believe the defendant would recognize your father if he saw his face?"

The courtroom is completely silent, but all Bucky can hear is the rush of blood in his ears.

*What the hell is going on?*

"Mr. Stark?"

"Yes," Tony says.

"Yes? You think he would recognize your father if he saw him?"

Tony's expression is so dark, right now, Bucky doesn't even recognize *him.*

But Tony, again, says, "Yes."

Landman grins, wide and wolfish. "I think it would be beneficial to find out for sure."

Tony's hard expression changes into… *panic.*

The man turns and motions to one of his associates off to the side, who wheels a large, silver projector into the center of the room. Bucky's head feels like it's spinning. He has no idea what the hell is going on as the projector turns on, displaying a wide, holographic screen.

"Play the video, please."

He stares at Tony, but the man doesn't turn his gaze from the screen. He looks like he's about to start hyperventilating at any moment. *What the fuck is happening?* Bucky thinks, desperately, turning in his seat to silently beg Steve for help, but Steve—

Steve looks as panicked as Tony does.

Panicked. Angry. And completely fucking helpless.

The screen lights up, big enough for the whole room to see. An old, grainy, unfamiliar video begins to play.

But the date.

The date in the corner.

It's—

Zemo's voice suddenly rings in his head, a buried thought, a memory that had been blotted out by his all-consuming grief: *Now, Soldier. Mission report. December 16, 1991.*

Bucky lurches violently in his seat.

It all comes back in an instant.

*Tony.* He looks up at him, at his friend, who still looks moments away from passing out, and feels his heart rip in two. *Oh God, no, Tony, no no no please.*

Landman turns back, meets his gaze.

And smiles.

And then Bucky knows. He knows this isn't a ploy to win the trial. He knows the prosecution is already well aware they're going to lose, that Bucky and his doctors and T'Challa's lawyers have all made their point too well. He knows. He sees that now.

This isn't about winning the trial.

It's about making it *hurt.*

He can't look away from the scene unfolding before him. That dark, snowy road. The memory stitches itself together with every passing second that the video plays. The crash. Bucky—the Winter Soldier—pulling up beside the car.

Tony's mother screaming for help.

*God, no, Tony. Please, Tony.*

His whole body shakes. Tony folds in on himself as he watches his parents die—as he watches Bucky, a man he stuck his neck out to help save, murder his mother and father.

The video isn't long, and it ends with the Soldier's impassive, untroubled face staring up at the camera, before attempting to destroy the evidence.

When it's over, for a moment, no one in the entire room moves or makes a sound. Bucky doesn't think he could even if he wanted to. He killed Howard Stark. Steve's friend.

He orphaned Tony.

*No no no no. God please no.*

He almost collapses in on himself, but a firm, steady hand reaches out and grabs his wrist beneath the table. Bucky jolts at the touch, but his lawyer doesn't remove his hand until he's taken a deep breath and forced his body to go loose.

He can't break down in front of the jury. He can't.

But for a moment, the consequences of that don't matter, because a vicious, insidious thought

clouds his mind: will it matter now, if he wins? Will it make one fucking bit of difference if they set him free?

Will Tony return his son to him now?

The realization dawns. That hateful look on Tony's face when they saw each other. He knew. He knew before the lawyer called his name. He knew Bucky killed his parents, and he learned that fact while Bucky was out of the picture—while caring for the son of the man who took everything from him.

He had Peter with him.

*Calm down,* he thinks, frantically. *You're not thinking. He wouldn't hurt Peter. You know he wouldn't hurt Peter. No matter how much he despises you. He would never do that.*

But would he keep him?

Would he separate them now, out of spite? Or to keep Peter safe from a man he can now never trust?

"Mr. Stark," the lawyer says, voice coated with false concern. "I only have one more question for you today."

It takes him a moment, but Tony manages to lift his head. He doesn't look at Bucky, but he doesn't need to. The expression on his face says more than enough. Tony looks like he wants nothing more than to see Bucky dead.

Depending on what Landman asks next, Bucky realizes with slow, mounting horror, Tony may just get his chance.

"Given the horrible scene we have all just witnessed," Landman says, "wouldn't you agree, Mr. Stark, that this man is not only dangerous on a completely unprecedented level, but that, for the good of all of us including himself, it is imperative that he be sentenced to the strictest security measures authorized by the court of law?"

Bucky doesn't dare to breathe.

Tony's cold gaze shifts over to him.

This is it. The chance for Tony to take his revenge. All he has to do is say yes. Yes, Bucky Barnes is a menace. A threat to everyone he meets. He should be locked away in the thickest cell we have. That's all it would take. One small word, and Bucky knows the jury would follow him, the way the Avengers have followed him, the way Peter has followed him. Tony Stark is just that kind of person.

And right now, he has the power to ensure Bucky never sees his son again.

It would be worse than death, but Tony knows that. And judging by the look on his face, he isn't opposed to the thought at all.

Bucky waits, frozen all the way to his core, for Tony to seal his fate.

But the man opens his mouth and says:

"Absolutely not."

Bucky flinches. Landman, clearly confused, sputters and says, “Forgive me, Mr. Stark, could you —could you repeat that?”

Tony rounds on him with a glare. “I said, *absolutely not.*”

“You don’t think this man—the defendant—deserves to be incarcerated for the crime we all just witnessed? As violent and horrible as it was?”

“I think the jury already decided that Bucky Barnes is not legally responsible for the Winter Soldier’s crimes,” Tony snaps. “And according to every single medical professional who’s examined him, there’s no evidence to suggest he’s going to randomly snap and go on a bloody rampage any more than the rest of us are. You don’t have a leg to stand on.”

He stands, glaring Landman down as he descends from the bench and heads for the doors.

Landman stays frozen solid for a moment, until what just happened catches up with him, and he runs an aggravated hand through his reedy blond hair and announces, belatedly, “No further questions.”

On his fifth day in court, three weeks after he was extradited to the US, Bucky Barnes is fully exonerated by the elected jury of the United Nations.

Steve is there, as he has been for every single court proceeding, and the moment Bucky’s wrist is uncuffed, he finds himself swept up in a tight, emotional, desperate hug.

One-armed and exhausted, Bucky clings back for everything he’s worth. He can’t keep the smile off his face despite how bone-tired he is. He did it. He’s kept his promise. He’s free of Hydra, and as of today, he no longer needs to run or hide. He reached the mountaintop.

“Thank God,” Steve is whispering into his shoulder. Somehow, Bucky knows he’s crying without seeing it. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank fucking God.”

“Easy, Rogers,” Bucky jokes, but his heart’s not in it. “If we should thank anyone, it’s definitely T’Challa.”

“You’re very welcome, Bucky.”

Bucky turns, Steve still mostly clinging to him, to greet his friend and savior. T’Challa grins at him, unabashedly, openly relieved, and holds out a long, silver case for him to take.

“I believe this is yours,” he says. “To celebrate your victory.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” Bucky says, but he obediently reaches over and pops the case open. His eyes get a little misty at the sight of an arm—a left arm, black and gold and definitely something designed by Shuri—and, more importantly, sitting next to it with an expectant look on its face, Orbie. “Hey, buddy.”

Orbie beeps at him indignantly, and Bucky can’t help but laugh. He picks the robot up and hands him to Steve before closing and accepting the silver case. “I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done for me, T’Challa.”

“There is one way you can thank me,” the King says.

“Name it.”

“Go home,” T’Challa says, a soft smile on his face. “Go home to your son and tell him that you love him.”

His heart feels like it’s in his throat when he wraps the man in a one-armed hug and says his goodbyes. None of this would have been possible without him. As long as Bucky lives, he will never be able to repay what T’Challa, Shuri, and the rest of Wakanda has done for him, and for his family.

The family he needs to go home to.

When T'Challa and his team are out of sight, Bucky turns back to Steve. “Peter—?”

“—Is waiting,” Steve says, grinning. “He wanted to come, but… just in case, I put the brakes on that. He’s waiting for us.”

“Where?” Bucky can’t help but ask. “Did he… did Tony…?”

Grief melts into Steve’s tired, relieved expression. “Tony let us stay at the tower these last few months,” he says. “He mostly… hasn’t. I think he was staying elsewhere. But he always came back if I had somewhere else I needed to be. He was there for Peter whenever I wasn’t. Just… never at the same time.”

Bucky blinks. “You… knew?” he realizes.

He’s never seen Steve look so guilty. “I found notes about it when I was raiding Hydra bases, trying to find you,” he says. “I never told Tony.”

“Steve…”

“And you… you didn’t remember?” he asks, hesitantly. “You didn’t know?”

Bucky shakes his head. “I remember a lot of things. But that sure as hell wasn’t one of them.”

“I’m sorry, Buck.”

“Just tell me one thing,” Bucky pleads. “Did Peter—was he there, when Tony found out? Did he have to deal with that? I need to know.”

Steve grimaces, tucking Orbie against his chest. “Tony’s known for months,” he says. “T’Challa told him before you left for Wakanda.”

T’Challa.

The day Tony blew a hole in his own roof and flew away.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Steve says. “I have a feeling that day would have gone very differently if Peter hadn’t been with us.”

Bucky’s heart sinks. He'd smiled at Tony and made him promise to look after his kid, moments before the man found out Bucky had killed his parents.

And he still took care of Peter while he was gone.

And then, essentially, told the UN's lawyer to go fuck himself.

God.

He's in the middle of trying to figure out how he can possibly apologize and thank Tony enough for it to mean anything when they step outside of the courthouse doors and catch sight of the man himself getting into the backseat of a car.

"Tony!" Bucky calls, taking the courthouse steps three at a time. "Tony—"

The man's head snaps up at the sound of his voice, pausing, one foot inside the car. He watches Bucky approach, his expression half-obscured by a pair of dark sunglasses.

Bucky comes to a stop and realizes he has no idea what the fuck to say.

"Tony," he tries. "I…" *I'm so fucking sorry.*

*I'm so fucking grateful.*

Tony stares at him wordlessly, his jaw tightening when Steve comes to a stop next to Bucky.

After a moment, he takes a deep breath and says, "Peter is waiting for you at the tower."

Bucky's face breaks into a relieved grin. "I—"

"I don't want to see you there when I get back." His voice is cold. It's not a request. His head tilts in Steve's direction. "Either of you."

"Tony," Bucky says, pleading, but the man finishes climbing into his car and slams the door.

Steve places his hand on the small of his back as they watch him drive away. It's odd how painful the loss is. Bucky's gained his freedom. His right to be a citizen of his home country again. He's moments away from reuniting with his child.

But he's lost a good friend.

The ache gnaws.

"Come on," Steve says, leading him down the sidewalk. "Our ride will be here soon."

With a deep breath, Bucky nods, forcing the conflicted feelings as far down as they can go. There's still so much to celebrate. To be grateful for. To look forward to.

"I'm ready," he says. "I just want to see my son."

# This Family I Have Found

Objectively, he knows that Avengers Tower is an incredible feat of modern architecture, but Bucky hardly pays the structure any attention as he and Steve step out of the elevator and onto the man's private floor.

His heart is in his throat, but for the first time in months, it's not a bad thing.

"Peter?" Steve calls out, breaking Bucky out of his thoughts. "Peanut? We're back."

They turn the corner where the kitchen and living room slot together, and across the L-shaped sofa, through a window that takes up the entire wall, Bucky sees him.

There's a balcony outside the window that faces Central Park. Peter is there, leaning over the railing, playing on a cellphone. His head whips up when they turn the corner, and Bucky watches the surprise and disbelief and joy and relief all cross his face at once, mouth popping open, his wide eyes shining with tears. He trips over himself bolting for the balcony door, not taking his eyes off Bucky, and promptly smacks face-first into the clear glass beside the opening.

Bucky winces at the loud *slap* the impact makes, jogging around the sofa to meet the kid halfway. "Jesus, Pete, that looked like it hurt, are you oka—*oof!"*

He doesn't get to finish.

"Dad," Peter whimpers, suddenly latched onto him, arms tight around Bucky's neck. Bucky is quick to hold the boy around the middle, to keep him up, hold him steady off the ground, when he realizes something startling:

Peter's feet are touching the floor.

He jerks and pulls the boy back far enough to peer down and confirm his suspicions.

"Holy *shit.*"

The boy's still short. Still short for his age. But he's… he's grown. He's grown so much, he has to be at least almost as tall as Tony, now, two, maybe even three inches taller than he was four months ago.

"Peter… look at you."

Peter grins at him. He's fuller, too. His shoulders aren't so narrow, not as bird-boned as he was the last time Bucky saw him. And his face. Bucky's eyes mist over as they search the kid's face, so intimately familiar, and in some ways entirely new. It's Peter's face. But he's growing into his jawline, the shape of his brow. His complexion is healthier, revealing a splattering of freckles across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose that Bucky never noticed before. He has the same sunshine grin stretched across his handsome face, but the baby fat has melted from his cheeks, the dimple beside his lips more pronounced than it ever was.

His eyes are the only thing about him that are the same. Big and dark and brimmed with happy tears. Bucky cups his face and stares into them, he can't believe how much closer Peter is now, tall enough to smack his forehead against Bucky's shoulder when he pulls him back in for a hug.

"I can't believe how much you've grown."

Peter laughs and hugs him tight. “Welcome home, Dad.”

Bucky can’t help squeezing and rocking him a little, side to side. His baby boy. He never has to miss another moment of his son’s life for as long as he lives. Despite the rush of emotions overwhelming him, the relief of that thought reigns supreme. “I’m home, kiddo,” he says, resting his temple to the crown of Peter’s head. “For good.”

Bucky roams through the tower floor while Steve and Peter pack.

It’s too much space for the two of them—would be too much for all three of them, even if Tony had allowed them to stay. Steve assures him their new place is a lot less daunting, and he’d be lying if he said he isn’t anxious to see it.

Part of it is that he’s anxious to obey Tony’s wishes and make himself scarce. And part of it is that he’s deeply curious what Steve’s idea of *“the perfect home for us,”* as he put it, looks like. The rest of him is just eager to be with his family in a place they can call their own. The floor Steve and Peter have stayed in for these last few months is beautiful, and spacious, and nicer than anything they could ever afford on their own, but it’s not home.

Not that Steve and Peter haven’t, clearly, done their best to make it feel like it. Bucky can’t help touring the place like it’s the world’s most comforting museum as Peter and Steve move from room to room, sorting things into boxes and suitcases.

Little things to stand out to him, flooding his whole body with warmth. The wooden bird feeders Steve and Peter made together at Tony’s lake mansion hanging out on the balcony. An easel in the living room, a canvas sitting atop it, displaying a half-finished painting of Central Park at sunset. Beside it, a cluttered desk, covered in technological bits and bobs that remind Bucky of their tiny island counter in their old shithole apartment, how messy it would get whenever Peter worked on his web-shooters.

Clothes and books and fragments of Peter’s homework are scattered across most surfaces. Bucky’s eyes get misty when he realizes Peter’s already in his junior year. How quickly things can change. He smiles, thinking back to Peter’s freshman year graduation, how proud he had been that day. How much Peter has grown, in every way, since then.

But by far, his favorite part of the whole place is the fridge.

He’s sure it’s well-stocked with whatever ultra, nutrient-rich fertilizer Peter’s clearly been fed since Bucky left, but that’s not why he loves it.

It’s the outside that he can’t get enough of.

It tells the whole story. Everything he’s missed, all the little things that have happened in his absence. The most obvious example is the photos, no doubt taken with the camera Steve bought for Peter back in Montana.

There has to be at least a dozen of them. Steve standing at the stove, pensively staring down at a pot, black smoke wafting in his face, an apron that looks child-sized stretching ridiculously across his massive chest. Tony in his workshop, hands blurred mid-gesture, his mouth open and face bright like he’s in the middle of a passionate speech. Peter lounging on the sofa, a goofy, candid grin across his face, the photo clearly taken the moment he noticed the camera. Peter slouched over

the dining table with an incredible case of bed-head. Peter and Ned playing video games on the floor, staring up at the TV with happy smiles. Steve passed out in a reclining chair, an open book draped across his face. Peter looking sheepish and a little sad outside of Midtown Tech, both hands gripping his backpack straps, his gaze averted. His first day of school, Bucky realizes. It couldn't have been taken more than a couple of weeks ago.

And in the middle of them, like a centerpiece: the photo of Peter and Bucky that Sharon had taken of them back at Frank's—Bucky's cap pulled low over his face, hands shoved in the engine of a car, Peter leaning against the bumper, gazing up at him, affection beaming in his big, dark eyes. Bucky's surprised to see it, after telling Peter he could only keep it if he hid it away. It looks pristine. Well cared for. It makes his chest ache when he sees it. The first photo of the two of them ever taken.

He hopes that soon, Peter will have many more to add to his collection.

The photos aren't the only things on display. There are trinkets, little hints of Peter and Steve's life together that soothe the ache resonating in his chest. A little note, messily scribbled on a torn piece of notebook paper, Peter's boyish writing scrawling out: *hey Pops, went to the movies with Ned and MJ, be home by 10. Love you!* Bucky stares at it, his heart full. He wonders who MJ is, and when Peter started calling Steve *Pops.* Maybe it was around the same time Steve started calling him *Peanut.*

Part of Bucky is sad he missed it. The rest of him is just relieved to feel so much love between the two of them.

There are birthday cards pinned up, too. He doesn't feel ashamed about reading them—they are on display, after all. Peter's birthday card to Steve is sincere and sweet and full of gratitude, his message short and to the point: *Happy birthday, Steve! I never know what to write in these things but I love you and I'm grateful for all you do. To prove it, I promise to let you win one next time we play Mario Kart. It's a big sacrifice but you deserve it. Love, Peter.*

Bucky chuckles, despite having zero earthly idea what the hell Mario Kart is. He puts the card back and picks up the next one: a birthday card for Peter, but this one is from Tony.

It doesn't surprise him that the card is more humorous than heartfelt, but in some ways, it does. Tony choosing to make a joke instead of be brutally honest about his feelings seems right up his alley… and yet, if ever there was a valid excuse to let his walls down a bit and shamelessly admit that he cares, it feels like this would have been it.

The card reads, *I survived another year and all I got was this lousy card,* written above a drawing of a worn-down, ragged-looking cartoon bird. It's too mature for a kid's sixteenth birthday, but the message Tony wrote makes up for it.

*Happy birthday, kid. Try not to get too hopped up on birthday cake tonight, the last thing you need is more sugar. I've got Star Trek: The Next Generation queued up and a box of those mini sausage rolls with your name on it whenever you're ready. You know where I'll be. — TS*

How like Tony, to go out of his way to make a card for someone and then not hand it to them in person. At least, Bucky's assuming it wasn't handed to Peter in person—the way it's written makes him think it was left out, in plain sight, placed somewhere Peter stumbled upon it as if it appeared out of nowhere.

And still he can feel the man's concern when he reads between the lines. It comforts him to know that Tony was still there for Peter; that learning about what Bucky had done and that Steve hid it

from him didn't stop him from keeping his promise and being there when Peter needed him. He knows the boy would have been fine if it had only been him and Steve—but Peter adores Tony, and Bucky's grateful that he didn't have to say goodbye to two people he loves at the exact same time, both of them Bucky's doing.

He puts the card back and eyes the last one, already suspecting what it will say, but opening it anyway.

Steve's birthday card to Peter.

It's handmade, a little white card with a watercolor painting of Peter sitting in a windowsill, bathed in the orange light of sunset, face turned away to stare out the Tower window. The caption at the bottom is written in thick black ink, Steve's neat penmanship a stark contrast to Peter's: *Peter, Avengers Tower, July 23rd, 2017.* Bucky traces the beautiful piece of art with his metal hand before flipping the card open. Inside it reads:

*Peter, you were an unexpected addition to our lives, but now that you're here we could never imagine life without you. We're grateful that you were brought into this world and that we were lucky enough to become your parents. You have made both of us happier than you will ever know.*

*Happy Birthday.*

*Love, Dad & Pops.*

Bucky's breath catches in his throat. He reads it twice, again, then a fourth time. His eyes glaze over with tears. Fucking Steve. Of course he would sign a card from both of them, knowing Bucky would want him to without ever needing to ask. He gently pins the card back to its spot on the refrigerator door and takes one last look at the whole picture.

The magnets pinning everything to the door are letters of the alphabet, and he realizes when he takes a step back that they all spell out different things: P-O-P-S holds up the photo of Steve at the stove, Z-Z-Z on the one of him sleeping in the recliner. C-U-T-E on the photo of Peter's outrageous bed-head. B-F-F on the photo of Peter and Ned.

D-A-D-&-M-E on the photo of Bucky and Peter at Frank's dealership.

And on the birthday cards underneath, spread out to hold up each card, the magnets spell out I-L-O-V-E-Y-O-U.

He hears the gentle pitter-patter of bare feet on the smooth, engineered floor before two scrawny arms wrap around his chest.

Bucky smiles and holds his son's arms. "You finish packing?"

"No," Peter says. "Just wanted to hug you."

The boy nuzzles his face into Bucky's back. The moment hits him a little too abruptly—he really did it. He made it home, home to his family. He's okay and Peter's okay and Steve's okay and they're here together, reunited at last. It feels unreal. He turns in Peter's arms so he can wrap him up in a proper hug, needing to ground himself, briefly overwhelmed.

*He's here,* he reassures himself, squeezing the boy tighter. *He's real, it's real. He's here. I'm home.*

"I missed you," Peter says, muffled, his face smooshed against Bucky's collarbones.

“I missed you, too.” Bucky rests his head on top of his son’s, eyes slipping closed. “You brought me home, kiddo,” he says, confessing it, like he’s asking for forgiveness. “Thoughts of you kept me going. You’ll probably never know how much. But every time I started to doubt myself, I knew you were here, waiting. Thinking of me.”

He pulls away slightly, smooths some of the unruly hair from the boy’s face. Peter looks up at him and smiles. He doesn’t deserve it, but he finds the forgiveness he was hoping for when he looks into those eyes.

“I was always thinking of you, Dad,” Peter says, not realizing that Bucky fully understands the weight of those words now. The significance of them. The most important thing in the entire world, to Peter and Bucky both—that thing that made them a family: the fact that there was one person, one single person in this wide, crowded world, who was thinking of them.

He knows he doesn’t need to, but he says it anyway, “I’m sorry I had to leave, Peter.” He gently squeezes the boy’s shoulders, comforting, apologetic. “I know I never said it, but I’m—” the words catch in his throat. He laughs, breathless, surprised when tears start running down his cheeks, hot enough to scald his skin. “I’m so glad you followed me home that night.”

Peter’s eyes brim with tears, like a biological reaction to his own. Bucky gently runs the knuckle of his forefinger across the boy’s cheek to catch the first few tears as they begin to fall. He wipes his own face with the back of his metal hand, smiling in spite of the mess he’s making.

“I thought of you too,” he says, when he’s sure his voice won’t crumble the moment he opens his mouth. “And I always have. You were in my heart from the moment we met, Peter. I was scared to get close to you because I think I knew, even back then, how much I would end up loving you. How badly I needed you.”

He wonders if Peter knew it too, deep down. If that gut feeling that told him Bucky was good and safe also told him how much Peter could help him, how important it is to have someone in your life that you would fight for, even when all the odds seemed stacked against you. How each of us needs someone, even if it’s only a single person, to hold onto, to care for us and to take care of, to think of us, to keep us from being alone. He wonders if the subconscious part of Peter that knew he needed Bucky knew that Bucky needed him to, even when Bucky himself didn’t.

Bucky clears his throat with a soft laugh and says, “You told me once that I was your hero for saving you that night.” He remembers how viscerally he had wanted to deny it, back then—how deeply it cut to think a child as good and pure as Peter saw him as anything other than a monster. The guilt of feeling like he had pulled the wool over the boy’s eyes without ever meaning to, almost as fierce as his determination to never let anyone harm this person who meant the world to him. His smile widens, his hand gently cupping the boy’s head. “But from day one, Peter, even when I didn’t know it, you were *always* the one who was saving me.” He presses their foreheads together, lets the tears fall freely. “Thank you for finding me.”

Peter inhales a watery breath, rolls their foreheads together. His hands are still so small when they wrap around Bucky’s wrists. It stuns him how hands that small can manage to hold up Bucky’s entire world. “You’re still my hero, Dad,” he says, his voice soft but his tone firm, like he needs Bucky to believe it. “Regardless of who saved who, you were kind enough to need me.” He pulls away, smiling up at him like Bucky hung the stars in the sky. “I’m really glad you and Steve became my dads.”

“We love you so much, Peter,” Steve says suddenly, both of them turning to follow the sound of his voice. He smiles at them from the other side of the kitchen, leaning against the wall like he’s been watching them for some time. “I know I can speak for both of us when I tell you, you are

easily the best thing the 21st century has produced so far."

Peter laughs, moving to grab some tissues to wipe his face. Bucky settles for the sleeve of his jacket, wiping his cheeks dry and then noticing Peter waiting, smiling up at him softly.

"Come on, kiddo," he says, arm wrapping around the boy's shoulders. "Let's finish packing so we can all finally go home."

Bucky would never admit that he had doubts, but he's glad to be proven wrong when he sees their new apartment.

Steve chose well. It's nowhere near as egregiously large as their private floor at the Avengers Tower, but it's the perfect size for them: a two-story brownstone in Brooklyn, only a few blocks away from where Brooklyn ends and Queens begins. The neighborhood is quiet—well, as quiet as it gets in New York, anyway—certainly much quieter than their shithole apartment had been, the old rickety building placed smack-dab on a major road.

Their new apartment is modestly sized, two bedrooms plus a den that Bucky immediately knows Steve is hoping to turn into a painting studio. There's already furniture loaded into all the main rooms, not much, but all the necessary things: beds, a dining table and chairs, a sofa. It's bare bones, but Bucky's grateful for that in some ways. It means they can truly make it theirs *together,* the three of them.

"How did you set this all up?" Bucky asks Steve, following the man inside with another load of boxes. They don't have much, but he's still surprised by how many boxes and bags they end up hauling from the Tower.

Steve huffs as he sets one of the larger boxes down. "It's been in the works for several weeks now. I never intended for us to stay at the Tower permanently, especially since… tensions were high. Thankfully, this revamped Accords deal includes a decent pension, and you'd be surprised what kind of discounts people are willing to hand out to Captain America."

"You're a national treasure, Steve."

Bucky laughs at the flat look the other man gives him.

"I had the furniture ordered a few days ago," Steve says, ignoring his comment. "I was thinking that… if… even if things didn't go well, Peter and I would still need somewhere to stay. That's why I didn't exactly go crazy with the shopping catalog."

"I'm glad you didn't," Bucky tells him, moving out of the way to let Peter inside, carrying way too many bags at once. "Kid, I told you not to overdo it."

"I can literally lift a bus, Dad."

"That's not what I'm worried about. Your arms are so full you can't even see where you're going. You're just asking to fall down these stairs and break your neck. Pace yourself a little, the boxes aren't going anywhere."

"I'm not going to fall!" Peter shouts, already out the door to grab more bags from the rented truck.

"Tell that to the face-print you made on Tony's window back at the Tower," Bucky calls back,

grinning when he hears Peter mutter grumpily to himself in response.

He sets his own armful of boxes down and then notices Steve hasn't moved. He looks up, their eyes meeting where Steve is lounging against the kitchen counter, watching him, a warm smile etched onto his face. "Like something you see, Rogers?"

"I do," he says. His voice is soft. Fond. "I like him a lot, in fact."

"When did you get to be such a charmer? I distinctly remember that Steve Rogers was an awkward little nerd who couldn't flirt with someone to save his life."

Steve shrugs, grinning. "Only because my heart was never in it. Seems to come much easier to me when it's you, Buck."

"I'm flattered."

"I'm just glad you're here," Steve confesses. "I hoped you would be, of course—I planned for it—but knowing there was a chance you wouldn't be… it made it pretty hard to enjoy any of this. Now you're here, and I'm so deliriously happy, I don't even know where to start."

"How about the kitchen?" Bucky suggests, grinning at the surly look Steve gives him. "Come on, Stevie. Soon it'll sink in that you're truly stuck with me forever and then you can mope and be sappy all you want. Let's finish unloading the truck so I can put our son to bed and fight you for the good side of the mattress."

Laughing, Steve shakes his head but obeys, following Bucky out the front door of their new home.

It takes a few weeks, but after days and days of arranging, rearranging and re-rearranging, Bucky can finally say they've made their new home truly theirs.

It's cozy. Warm. There isn't a single piece of busted, duct-taped dumpster furniture in the whole apartment, though Bucky did take advantage of some nearby thrift stores, garage sales and pawn shops to find homey, second-hand things to dress the place up a little.

There's a floorboard in the kitchen that creaks when he walks on it and their front door squeaks a bit too loudly when it opens, but those are minor things, easy fixes. The plumbing and appliances work and the walls are well-insulated, not drafty or rotting on the inside. For the first couple of weeks, he and Peter spend most weekends touring the markets, finding little things to fill their new home with, odds and ends that catch their attention.

Steve, ever the artist, always comes up with some attractive way to incorporate them into the interior design, even when he shakes his head at their questionable choices. "Why would you *buy this,*" he asks, dumbstruck, turning over the small, bright gold lamp with its glass, jade-colored lampshade in his hands. "It looks older than we are, Buck."

Bucky shrugs. "Peter said it looked lonely on the shelf," is all he says.

Steve makes a face, earning a wide, devilish grin on Bucky's.

"Well, it can be his desk lamp, then," he says, sorting it into the Peter Pile of their Sunday haul.

It becomes a routine, until there isn't a square inch in their new apartment that the three of them haven't personalized. Steve made the wise choice of using plants to break up the warm, earthy

tones of most of their furniture with a pop of color, and it ends up with their living room looking quite jungle-like, when all's said and done.

It's homey. Comforting. Bucky doesn't mind it at all.

He's added a few things himself, little things, personal touches that he had been thinking of for months.

The first was adding Becca's photo to the new collage they made on their fridge.

In some ways it had hurt to tell Peter about her, though he knows the boy would never blame him for what happened. "She looked like you," the boy says, running his fingers along the edge of her photograph. "She had your smile."

"The more I remember about her, the more reminded I am of you," Bucky confesses. Beside him, Steve wraps his arm around Bucky's waist and presses him in close, a tight side-hug. "She was a troublemaker at times, but… she was always such a good kid. Smart. Kind. You would have really liked her."

A small smile crosses the boy's face. "Yeah. I bet I would have."

"She was always so protective of you," Steve says. His hand tightens on Bucky's hip. "It was always so funny to see; you were already so tall and filled-out when we were teens, and she was this little slip of a thing, shorter than even me. It didn't matter. If someone messed with you—usually because they were messing with *me,* and you stepped in—she'd act like she was ten feet tall. Kid wasn't scared of anything."

"She used to get so mad at us when we came home all beat up," Bucky says, chuckling. "She had everybody fooled with that 'sweet little girl' act. Guys in the army couldn't cuss someone out as well as my baby sister could."

"I wonder where she learned it from," Steve deadpans.

Bucky only smiles wider.

Becca's photo looks at home on their fridge. Steve hangs a photo of his mother, too, and in the center Peter hangs a selfie of the three of them, taken on their first night in their new apartment: sitting on the sofa in their empty living room, surrounded by boxes, side by side and stuffing their face with pizza. Peter had whipped out his camera and taken the shot without a word, catching Bucky mid-bite of a slice of pizza, Steve half-turned to face him, a soft smile on his face. Peter's grinning up at the camera, bright and a little mischievous.

It's a good photo. The magnets holding it up spell out F-A-M-I-L-Y, and it makes Bucky's throat feel tight every time he sees it.

In the living room, they dedicate the wall beside the TV for the rest of the family photos, hung in a mixture of mismatched frames. Peter hangs a photo of his mother and father, and one of him when he was younger with his aunt and uncle, when he was so little, Bucky's heart aches to look at him. Steve hangs a photo of the two of them from their army days, grinning like fools, Bucky beaming at Steve like the lovesick idiot he is. Bucky hangs a copy of the photo of him and his family that used to hang above their fireplace in his childhood home.

The rest of the space is dedicated to new photos of the three of them.

It fills up slowly, like the rest of their home. Peter wastes no time in decorating his room to the

nines with every geeky, pop culture related thing he can find. It's such a source of pride to see his son at home in his own room, having a space all to himself, his own bed, a place that is truly his. Bucky's wanted to give him this almost since the day they met. Seeing Peter now, happy and comfortable and safe, hanging posters on his walls, stringing lights up above his bed, arranging his books and DVDs just-so, a certain organized chaos… it calms Bucky somewhere deep in his psyche. It feels right.

His and Steve's room is comfortable and cozy, if a little cramped. The huge bed is worth taking up most of the room for—Steve might not be the most frivolous spender, but he clearly didn't scrimp on this purchase.

Bucky lets him take over in the decorating department, and he's glad he did. Steve hangs plants in front of their window, and paintings above and across from the bed—original works in beautiful pastel watercolors. A brass-framed mirror somehow makes the room seem bigger than it is, and the white duvet on their bed and white curtains on the window makes it feel brighter, more filled with light.

He even lets Bucky have the good side of the mattress.

Bucky loves him with every beat of his heart. Steve was right.

In the end, their new home is perfect for them.

With their apartment fully moved into, Steve busy with his newfound Avengers responsibilities, and Peter halfway through his first semester of his junior year, Bucky finds himself with more time on his hands than he knows what to do with.

He talks to T'Challa and Shuri now and then, taking advantage of Orbie's communication abilities to video chat with the Wakandans from time to time. T'Challa even has his doctor make a referral for him to continue his therapy in New York, which Bucky appreciates. Peter is seeing a doctor too —supposedly started the same week Steve brought him back to New York—and between that, band practice, and the school Decathlon, Bucky is eager for ways to fill his day while he waits for Steve and Peter to come home.

He starts by shaving the impressive beard he grew while he was overseas, and while he's bent over the sink, staring at his face in the mirror, a thought hits him, almost overpowering in its intensity. He reaches for the pair of scissors in his grooming kit without a second thought.

When he steps out of the bathroom, dressed but still damp from his shower, Steve and Peter are making breakfast in the kitchen, making small talk about the busy Monday ahead of them. Peter notices him first, and stops dead when he looks up and sees him. "Holy shit, *Dad.*"

Steve turns around and Bucky watches his reaction carefully.

His eyes widen. His mouth falls open in a silent gasp, hands falling away from the frying pan and spatula he'd been holding. "Buck," he breathes out, soft, speechless. Bucky smiles and runs his hand through his freshly-cut hair, as short as he used to keep it back in the day.

He wonders if he looks like the Bucky Steve remembers most.

He's pretty sure he does, because Steve swallows thickly, a lump caught in his throat, and stares him down for a moment longer before he groans out, "Peter, go to school."

Peter looks between them, eyes wide, then abruptly drops his spoon into his half-finished bowl of cereal, throws his backpack on and practically books it for the door.

“Have a good day at school, kiddo!” Bucky calls, the air knocked from his lungs as Steve barrels into him, hands tight in his new, short hair, and pulls him in for an almost-violent kiss.

“Good*bye*!” Peter shouts, the door slamming loudly behind him, making Bucky laugh as Steve wrangles him down onto the couch.

They somehow make it back to the bed. Half an hour later, Bucky groans and rubs his now-smooth cheek against Steve’s chest, complaining, “Now I need another shower, you punk.”

Steve grunts, completely unapologetic. His hand trails up Bucky’s spine and gently cards through his short hair. “What made you want to cut it?”

Bucky hesitates, but isn’t sure why. He knows Steve will understand, that the man will have no reason to stop him. “It felt like something I needed to do, to move on.” His hand gently runs over Steve’s bare chest, caressing his skin. “And… I wanted to look presentable for my plans today.”

Steve, as Bucky told himself he would be, was more than supportive of Bucky’s plans.

He never expected him to join the Avengers, and Bucky’s grateful for that. They both know he would help if the situation arose and he was needed, but… just the same, if that day never comes, Bucky is more than happy to live as though there isn’t anything special about him at all.

He pauses outside the door, forcing himself to take a deep breath. He doesn’t know why he’s anxious. He’s done a lot worse and apologized to a lot more people than this, but he still feels tense with nerves. It takes him a moment to gather himself before he can push the door open.

They’re both standing there, at the front desk.

Sharon sees him first. She gasps like she’s seen a ghost, elbows her husband sharply in the arm. “Frank. *Frank!”*

Frank turns around, meets his gaze.

For a moment he looks completely livid. Bucky forces himself to stay put as the man half-shouts, “Son of a *bitch,*” and stomps over to him, staring him down, his angry, dark eyes boring holes into him.

Bucky smiles in spite of himself. “Hi, Frank.”

“You’ve got some nerve,” the man seethes, practically hissing the words in his fury. “Do you have any idea how damn *worried we were?!”*

And then he surges forward and wraps him in a tight hug, the angriest hug Bucky’s ever been given, and he laughs to stifle his sob and hugs the man back. “I’m sorry,” he says, patting the man firmly on the back. “For all of it. I’m sorry for everything I put you through.”

“You shut up,” Frank barks, pulling back, eyeing his face critically. “You look good,” he says after a moment, visibly relieved. “God, you had us worried out of our minds, Jim. We thought the feds got you. And then this trial—” He looks sharply back at his wife as she steps closer, waiting for her

turn to hug and scold Bucky in kind. “Your boy. What happened to your boy? Is he here? Is he safe?”

“Peter’s fine,” Bucky assures, heartbroken by the happy sob Sharon makes. “He’s at school right now. We have an apartment in Brooklyn near McCarren Park. He’s taking band in school, and he’s… he’s so tall, Frank, you wouldn’t recognize him.”

“I hardly even recognize *you,*” Frank grunts, tugging on a lock of Bucky’s short hair. “Hell, Jim. You worried us sick.”

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Frank says, gruff, leaving no room for argument. “We’re just glad you and your boy are all right. Fucking *hell,* Jim.”

Bucky grins and opens his arms for Sharon to squeeze him tightly in a hug. “We never believed those stories for a minute,” she says to him, sternly. “We’ve been waiting for you, Jim, darling. You *are* home now, aren’t you? Now that this whole trial nonsense has been settled? You’ll come back, won’t you?”

“That’s… actually part of the reason I’m here,” Bucky admits. “I was wondering how busy you are. If you still need some help around the shop.”

Frank and Sharon look at each other, and then the man stares at him, his expression not giving a single thing away.

“When can you start?”

A routine settles between the three of them that comforts Bucky to his very core.

It’s domestic. Peaceful. They make breakfast together most mornings, except for the ones where Peter has trouble pulling himself out of bed. Steve always takes it upon himself to intervene in those moments: Bucky’s caught him, more than once, sitting on Peter’s bed, blasting terrible Oldies music from his phone, smiling as the boy groans and buries his head beneath his pillow.

God, he loves them so much, he can hardly stand it.

Steve does most of his Avengers business in the afternoons, so Bucky and Peter usually leave together in the mornings. They walk to the station together, just like they used to, talking and making each other laugh until they go their separate ways, to school and work respectively.

Bucky usually has the house to himself when he gets home. Sometimes Steve isn’t needed at the Tower, and they’ll steal a quiet moment to themselves before Peter returns from school or his extracurricular activities, taking advantage of the brief window of privacy.

Sometimes Peter doesn’t come home until late, spending time with his friends or going to the Tower to see Tony, though he tries to be home for dinner most nights, at the very least. They implemented a “no patrolling until after dinner” rule, so unless the boy’s made plans to eat elsewhere, he at the very least graces them with his presence long enough to eat something before taking off again.

Bucky tries not to feel lonely about it. He’s glad Peter is getting out a bit more, truly, he is. And

it’s hard to feel lonesome when Steve seems riveted to his side, as though he’s bent on making up for all of their lost time.

And really, Bucky knows he’s being a tad unreasonable: Peter isn’t spending *that* much time away from home. He’s home by the evenings, and unless patrolling runs late for some reason, he’s usually up to spending some time with them before bed, curling up on the couch and watching a movie or an episode of a show with them, or sometimes a game, or they’ll make hot chocolate or tea and sit and talk about their day.

And Peter’s home most weekends, especially as the last tendrils of summer give way to fall. On the rainy days, the slow, quiet mornings when there’s no school or work or Avengers business to concern themselves with, they’ll sit on the couch, Peter lounging against his side, seemingly content to curl up against him and never move.

Bucky knows his boy is growing up and these moments may be fewer and farther between.

But God if he doesn’t plan to soak up every second of it that he can get.

Those days are by far Bucky’s favorite: the slow days, when it’s just the three of them, happy and at home together, warm and safe where they belong. They’re better than anything he ever thought he would deserve. His chest feels like it might crack open trying to contain all the love he feels, on days like that.

They’re nearly perfect.

Nearly.

It’s hard to think of family and not think of Tony, no matter how hard he tries.

It’s something he’s been able to discuss with his doctor in his therapy sessions: the guilt, the desire to make it all right, to tell Tony how utterly, devastatingly sorry he is. His doctor lets him vent, but gently reassures him that some things are just out of our control, no matter how desperately we wish otherwise.

He knows he can’t make things right between them, despite how badly he wants to.

Tony has every right to keep his distance. He still spends time with Peter. Still invites him to the Tower, though he fully keeps his distance from Steve, and even more so from Bucky.

Bucky can tell that Peter is hurt by the rift between them, that he wants things to go back to normal. But whenever Bucky tries to broach the subject, Peter just smiles and shakes his head, tells him it’s all right—that he has faith Mr. Stark will forgive him, but if he doesn’t, that it’s okay. They’re still a family, and that won’t ever change.

He’s right. Bucky knows he is. If Tony can’t ever forgive him, it won’t change the fact that Bucky has finally found his home, a family he loves with all of his heart. It hurts to think they can never go back to the way things were… but that’s not up to him, and he has to live with that.

So he makes his peace with Tony’s decision and the man’s feelings for him, thanks to Peter’s gentle guidance.

And then, almost that very same night, there’s a brisk knock at the door.

Bucky isn’t sure who to expect when he opens it.

But it sure as hell isn't—

"...Tony?"

"Barnes," Tony says. He's dressed in a suit, hands stuffed in his pockets. His expression is hidden away behind those same dark sunglasses, except for the tightness in his jaw. Bucky gapes at him, speechless and stunned. He doesn't know where to begin. Then the man sighs, removes his sunglasses, folds them and says, "So it turns out, resentment is corrosive, and I hate it."

Something catches in Bucky's throat.

"Tony…"

The man looks at him, their eyes meeting. Bucky wants to apologize, to thank him, to somehow make the other man understand what his friendship meant to him, what an impact he's had on their family.

But he's not sure where to start. When he opens his mouth, the only thing that comes out is, "I'm really glad you're here."

Tony lifts an eyebrow at him, and the slight quirk of his lips tells Bucky that this isn't the right time to pour his heart out—that that's not why Tony's here, and maybe he just isn't ready to hear it.

So Bucky opens the door wider and steps aside. "Coming in? We've got pizza on the way and *Empire Strikes Back* is about to start."

Tony shakes his head at him, but steps inside without complaint.

"Someone should tell your kid that they've made literally thousands of other movies since 1983."

Well. *Almost* without complaint, anyway.

# And Suddenly, I See You

It feels like the last warm day of autumn when they visit Becca's grave for the first time.

Autumn in New York should be cold, dreary and pissing down rain, but it's not—it's bright and sunny and almost too warm for the jacket Bucky's wearing. It's a beautiful day. It doesn't make the occasion any easier, but… he's still glad that the first time he sees his baby sister's tombstone, it's warm beneath the light of the sun.

She had purchased a plot beside their parents. Bucky's throat closes up when he notices the very obvious, almost foreboding space left open for him. His own grave, he knows, is probably still standing at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial, beside Steve's, bodiless as they were the day they were erected.

He was never meant to be buried here, he realizes with no small amount of grief. He doesn't belong beside his parents and sister. Their family plot. As morbid as it is, he's glad that Becca is here, with their mother and father. That at least, in the very end, she got to be with their family.

He lays flowers on her grave and runs his human hand over the letters of her name.

"You're probably the only person in the world who wouldn't be surprised that Steve followed me seventy years into the future," he tells her. "I hope you found your happiness the way I found mine, Bebbie."

Steve lets out a quiet, fond chuckle. "She always hated that nickname."

"How do you get 'Bebbie' out of 'Becca'?" Peter asks.

The memory makes Bucky smile. He can see it, clearer every day, little toddler Becca waddling up to him, arms out-stretched. How he would take her outside to play on days just like this one, show her off to the adoring pedestrians outside their Brooklyn estate, her bubbly, incoherent murmuring as she tried to tell them her own name: *Bebba. Bebb-uhhh.*

He's not sure when *Bebbie* followed after *Bebba,* but it stuck with her right until the day Bucky left for war. She didn't take nearly as kindly to her nickname as he took to 'Bucky.'

*I'm sorry I wasn't here for you,* he thinks, palm flat over her name. *I miss you, kiddo.*

He stands and drapes his metal arm over Peter's shoulders, holding the kid tight to him. "I know you'd remember Steve, even if you wouldn't recognize him now that he's all tall and muscular—but he and I are, uh, *together,* finally. Took us long enough, hey?"

Steve's shoulder nudges against his. Bucky leans into him, receptive.

"And this, Becca… this is your nephew." His hand squeezes Peter's shoulder, firm and fond. "My son, Peter."

"Hey Aunt Becca," Peter says, his tone sad, but his smile soft and gentle. "Dad's told me a lot about you. Thanks for always trying to keep him out of trouble. He told me you always took really good care of him."

God. Why is that, of all things, the thing that makes bitter tears sting his eyes?

“I know you’re already at peace, but… I wanted to tell you, you don’t need to worry about him, Aunt Becca.” Peter crouches down, like Bucky just was, pressing his hand over the sun-warmed stone. “Dad’s been through a lot… but I promise, I’ll take care of him. So wherever you are, you can rest easy, okay?” He sounds so sincere. Not a hint of disingenuousness in his voice, though he didn’t even know Becca. “I’m following in your footsteps. I’ll take care of Dad and keep him safe. I promise.”

*You already do,* Bucky thinks, the thought popping into his head stubbornly, like it has a mind of its own. *More than you could ever know.*

He lets Steve pull him in when a warm hand wraps around his waist, drawing him to the other man’s side. It’s only then that he’s made aware of the tears dampening his cheeks. He knows it’s not, but when Peter stands, sees the look on his face and immediately embraces him, and Bucky wraps his arms tight around the boy’s shoulders and holds him to his chest, well—for a moment, he swears it’s Becca’s arms that hug him back, fierce and unyielding, clinging to him desperately; the goodbye hug that they never got to have.

“Come on, Dad,” Peter whines, tugging at his sleeve incessantly. “Just one look. I won’t even take it apart.”

Bucky scowls to trample down on the smile that’s trying to stretch across his face. “*No,* Peter.”

“But it’s *so cool!”*

“There’s nothing to be scared of,” Tony says, snapping a pair of pliers at him ominously. “We’re professionals. Well, I am, at least. We’ll be gentle.”

Bucky throws the man a glare over the island counter. “ *No.* No to all three of you, it’s not happening. Shuri would kill me.”

“She doesn’t have to know!” Peter says, but he’s smiling, so Bucky knows he’s already accepted that he isn’t winning this fight, and is arguing just to be a brat.

It’s absolutely Tony’s influence.

“Just one peek,” Tony says. He’s pleading, but has a way of sounding like he’s not. “We’ll be in and out before you know it. Cross my heart.”

Ned claps his hands together and peers up at him with wide, begging eyes. “Pleeeease, Peter’s Dad?”

Bucky frowns at Ned and then points his spatula at Tony, accusing. “Look what you did. Stop corrupting the children and go find something else to tinker with. My arm is off-limits.” As if on cue, Steve comes through the front door then, smiling at the four of them with his arms full of grocery bags. “Steve, take the kids for a walk or something. I’m trying to make dinner here.”

Steve chuckles and joins him in the kitchen, setting the groceries down and ruffling Peter’s hair fondly. “Okay, guys. Everybody out of the kitchen. You should know better than to hound somebody who’s so… well-armed.”

Peter and Ned groan like they’ve been sucker-punched. Tony looks wonderfully angry. Bucky just rolls his eyes, but fails at keeping the grin completely off his face when Steve laughs loudly at the

collective outrage of the other three.

“I mean it. Everyone out on the count on three, or I’ll grab *The World’s Punniest Dad Jokes* from the bookshelf.”

“Tactical retreat,” Tony announces, helping Steve to shepherd the boys out into the living room, like he wasn’t the one who instigated the whole thing.

Bucky mouths a silent *thank you* to Steve, who smiles and blows him a kiss. Dork. But it does put a dopey smile on his face as he turns back to the stove and finishes cooking.

Friday nights at the Barnes-Rogers household have become a lot more lively, especially since Tony came back into the fold. They seem to have a full house almost every week, which should feel like an overwhelming, drastic change for Bucky, but… it’s nice.

It’s really nice.

It’s nice seeing Peter happy. He’s still the same cheerful, bubbly kid he’s always been, but Bucky can tell he feels truly content on nights like this one, surrounded by his parents and his idol and his best friend, all coming together to spend an evening joking and laughing and eating, united by how much they love him.

Sometimes, Bucky wonders if he will ever face a problem that can’t be solved by how much he—and everyone else—loves that boy.

He seriously doubts it.

Just as he’s putting the final touches on their meal, Steve stomps back into the kitchen with a frustrated sigh and says, “Buck, tell Tony he’s gone way too far this time.”

Tony’s footsteps pad into the room behind Steve’s, so Bucky idly says without turning around, “Tony, you’ve probably gone way too far this time.”

The man huffs, indignant. “You don’t even know what I did.”

“No, but knowing you, it was excessive and uncalled for.”

Silence hangs ominously. Bucky turns and raises one eyebrow at the two men, Tony looking reproachful, Steve frowning at him with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

“Wow,” Bucky says. “All right, seriously, what did you do?”

Steve doesn’t take his eyes off Tony. “He bought us a ranch.”

“A…” Bucky starts, his brain stuttering to a halt. “A *what?* ”

“For the last time, Rogers, I did *not* buy you a ranch,” Tony snaps, narrowing his eyes up at Steve. “I bought you the horses. The ranch is just to *house* them.”

“That’s—that’s the same thing!” Steve says, his voice rising two whole octaves. Wow. “It doesn’t matter if you don’t put our names on the deed, Tony, you bought an entire *ranch* to house three very expensive animals which were already *way* too big of a gift. Stop carelessly spending your money on these things or I swear, I’m going to go bald from the stress.”

“Steve, there’s no way to say this without sounding like a dick, but I’ve literally made back twice the amount of money I spent on this just within the four minutes we’ve spent talking about it. I’m a

billionaire. It'll take a lot more than an extravagant gift now and then to bankrupt me."

Bucky's head spins. He feels like he'll only get more lost if he doesn't intervene, so he lifts a hand and says, "Can—can we rewind here, for a second? Please?"

Both men turn to look at him. Steve looks expectant, but Tony looks ready to keep arguing. Bucky's brain is still trying to catch up.

"Tony… why did you randomly buy us horses?"

The man looks at him like he just asked how many days are in a week, seemingly stunned by the stupidity.

"You guys went riding before, remember? Back in Montana?"

"Well… yes," Bucky says, "but that's no reason to go out and buy us our own horses. We were planning to find a stable that offers trail riding once we were completely settled in—you didn't need to do this."

"Well, now you don't *need* to find a stable," Tony says, like it's obvious. "Peter mentioned a couple weeks back that he wanted to go again, so, you know, I thought I'd surprise him." He turns to Steve and almost… pouts. "I figured you might complain if I left them tied up to your railing outside, so the ranch was kind of necessary. I won't apologize."

Steve rubs his forehead, visibly frustrated. "Tony, no, we're grateful, it's just—that's a *huge* gift to arbitrarily throw into a conversation like that. I'm still processing."

"Well, Cap, the horses aren't going anywhere, so I kind of think you can take all the time you need."

"Really though, Tony," Bucky says, his voice dropping low, to a near-whisper, so the boys can't hear from the living room. "You're already helping me out so much with… you-know-what. That in itself is a huge gift. We don't want you to feel obligated to spend your money on us. We're doing all right."

"And you shouldn't buy Peter everything he says he wants," Steve adds. "Not to say that I think he'd become spoiled or greedy, it's just, it's not a good habit to get into. If you absolutely have to buy people things, save it for birthdays and holidays, okay? It'd just be better for all involved."

"Okay, okay, fine." Tony throws his hands up in surrender, conceding. "I yield. You guys win. No more big gifts after the horses and you-know-what."

Bucky and Steve sigh in unison. "Thank you, Tony," Bucky says.

The smile Tony gives him might just be the fondest, most genuine one Bucky's ever seen on his face. "Don't mention it, Bucko."

Bucky and Steve let Tony break the news to Peter that he bought them their own horses, who shares his fathers' reactions of being completely shocked and more than a little overwhelmed. Then Tony off-handedly mentions that they're the very same horses the trio rode during their little adventure back in Montana, and Peter switches from dumbstruck to downright *thrilled* in the fraction of a nanosecond.

“You bought Andromeda?” he asks hopefully, practically vibrating with excitement.

Tony looks put out, but Bucky knows it’s a farce. “And Britney Spurs. And the other one, whatever the hell his name was, David Hasselhoof.”

Peter’s nose scrunches up at the pun. “I don’t think that was it.”

“Well, regardless.” Tony shrugs. “The three you guys rode are the three that I bought.”

“You should get one too, Mr. Stark,” Peter says, eyes bright at the idea. “Then we could all go riding together!”

Tony looks like he would rather walk through dog shit. “No thanks, kiddo. Lumbering around on farm animals can be *your* idea of a good time. I’ll be inside sipping scotch by the fire.”

“Just be grateful he’s coming with us, Pete,” Bucky says, ruffling the boy’s hair. “Apparently it’s a miracle he’s willing to go on vacation somewhere that isn’t tropical and sunny in the first place.”

“You’re damn right it is,” Tony scoffs. “You’re lucky it’s volcano season in Hawaii or I’d be in the middle of the Pacific ocean right now.”

Peter laughs joyously and shakes his head. “Uh, I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works, but okay.”

Bucky smiles as the two banter back and forth, relaxing fully into Steve’s side, cuddled up on the couch. It’s been a bit hectic planning for their trip to New Jersey to stay at Tony’s new ranch, mostly because of all the other little things that are going into making it a special occasion, but the day is steadily approaching and Bucky already knows it will all be worth it.

Steve presses a lingering kiss against his temple, gesturing to the pamphlet he’s been focused on for several minutes, now. “Liberty Science Center has a planetarium and an interactive exhibit we could stop by on the way.”

Both Tony and Peter’s heads snap up at the suggestion.

“Yeah!” Peter grins, eyes twinkling. “Can we? We totally should!”

Tony’s voice is dry but undeniably teasing as he says, “Pretty sure they’ll insist on waiting until it’s posthumous before they let us donate you to their exhibit, Cap.”

Steve doesn’t look away from his reading as he gently tosses a throw pillow at the man’s head.

Bucky chuckles but doesn’t tear his eyes away from the pamphlet’s photos of the planetarium. It looks a lot like the one he took Peter to on his fifteenth birthday—he supposes that makes sense, they’re all the same stars, after all—so for a moment he isn’t sure the boy will enjoy it as much as he enjoyed it the first time.

But when he looks up, Peter is peering at him with wide, eager, pleading eyes, so Bucky grins and says to Steve, “I think the planetarium is a *great* idea.”

The beaming smile his son gives him seals the deal.

“Christ, Barnes, would you please relax? I’m telling you, everything is going to be *fine.*”

Tony sounds confident, as confident as he always does, but that doesn't do Bucky's nerves any good. He can't stop the tremor in his leg no matter how hard he tries. He's nervous. Scared shitless, really, if he's being completely honest.

"I can't help it," he says, leg bouncing anxiously. "This is *it,* Tony."

Tony sighs and rubs both hands over his face. "Bucky, I've greased the wheels on this thing so thoroughly that it would take divine intervention to put the brakes on it now. It's happening. We only have to wait, like, ten more minutes. *It's going to be fine.*"

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, Bucky nods, elbows braced atop his knees and hands clasped together. He knows Tony is right—almost every person in Bucky's life jumped at the chance to make this thing happen, and they're some of the most renowned, respected, and trustworthy people in the entire world—so regardless of Bucky's exonerated status and general infamy, there really is, on paper, no reason for his application to be denied.

Tony's money helped too, somewhere along the line, he's sure. He doesn't doubt for a moment that Tony paid off anyone who felt they needed to voice their concerns, but even still, doubt and anxiety fester in him.

"God, Tony. Being in court didn't terrify me as much as this does." He winces the moment the words leave his mouth, wishing he could instantly take them back. Tony's face doesn't change, but his shoulders are a little tighter, his hands clenched a little more firmly around his biceps. He doesn't like to be reminded of that day, Bucky knows. He feels like a dick. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." The man waves him off. "I'm sure this particular sort of prenatal panic is tough to contend with. Just keep your head on. They're not going to deny it. But if they do, we can appeal. You have billionaires, living legends, literal kings and scary-looking automotive dealership owners vouching for you. They're gravely outmatched."

He can't help but smile. "If I spent the rest of my life trying, I could never tell you how grateful I am for all that you've done for me."

"Don't sweat it."

"I want to," Bucky insists. "No, don't roll your eyes at me, damn it Tony—I want to sweat it. I want you to know how grateful I am to have met you, and for everything you've done—none of this would have been remotely possible without you, and on top of everything, you're here with me now despite how much I made you suffer, and I need you to know what it means. To me. And to Steve, and most of all to Peter. So just… thank you."

"Yeah, okay, you're welcome," Tony says, adding stress to each word, clearly deeply uncomfortable. "Look. I'm not saying you and I and Steve *never* need to have this conversation, I'm just—first of all, cards on the table? I'm not there yet. I'm working on it. I'm just fucking sick of being angry all the time, okay? It's exhausting."

Sure enough, when he moves his hand from his eyes, they suddenly look darker, the skin underneath them almost bruised, like just this conversation has completely taken the wind out of Tony's sails.

"I don't want to resent you and Steve. That's it. Does that mean I'm going to force myself to forgive and forget? No. But every minute I spend keeping my distance from the two of you out of anger is another minute I spend away from that kid, who is family to me now, whether you like it or not. We can do the whole… groveling-thanks-and-apologies routine later, Bucky. When I can

handle it. This cramped, musty office is not the place for it and it sure as hell isn't the time, either."

"Okay," Bucky says, smiling when Tony seems to sag in relief. "It's your call, Tony. Am I at least allowed to thank you for bringing me to said cramped, musty office?"

There's no meanness in it, but Bucky knows Tony isn't holding any of his punches when he stares off into the middle-distances and says, "I didn't do it for you."

Bucky doesn't know how to pack it.

It's not that it's big or bulky or oddly-shaped, because it's none of those things, it's just… weirdly heavy. Not literally; the thing weighs absolutely nothing, but when he tries to pack it alongside his clothes and toiletries, suddenly his bag feels like it holds an atomic bomb, the sheer fragility of its contents turning the entire package into a delicate, breakable thing.

He doesn't wrap it, because he knows they have several stops to make before they get to the ranch, and he figures he can get Steve or Tony to distract Peter long enough for him to sneak away and secretly buy some wrapping paper. Maybe even a frame. At least he would feel better dragging it around if he knew it was shielded behind a pane of glass. The way it is now, tucked away in nothing but an envelope, makes Bucky anxious to let his bag out of his sight.

"Are you all right, Buck?"

Bucky turns to look at Steve, standing in the doorway of their bedroom, watching him. He supposes he does look a little frazzled; frozen in the middle of their room, hands anxiously tight around the straps of his backpack, staring off into space with a worried expression. Even if he weren't being so obvious, he's sure Steve would be able to tell how tense he is just by looking at him.

He doesn't bother trying to lie about it. "I'm scared shitless, Stevie."

Steve's open, heartfelt expression eases some of the anxiety swirling in his gut. The man approaches him slowly, hand outstretched to gently stroke down Bucky's right arm. "It's okay," he says, his voice deep and warm and soothing. "Come here."

He wraps his arms around Bucky, holding him. It's a firm embrace but it's exactly what Bucky needs right now—warm and solid and as dependable as the ground beneath his feet. He sighs and tucks his face against Steve's throat, takes a deep breath of that familiar, comforting scent.

"I know he'll be happy," Bucky murmurs against Steve's skin, "but I'm still worried that he won't."

Steve kisses his hair, nods to show he's listening.

Doubt claws at Bucky's insides. "Do you think he's changed his mind?"

That makes Steve huff out a breathless laugh. "Not a chance in hell, Buck."

"What about you?"

The arms holding him loosen just a hair. He can hear the confusion in the man's voice when he asks, "What about me?"

Bucky lifts his head from the cook of the man's neck and gazes into his eyes. "Have you changed your mind?"

"About our *family?*" Steve asks, tone dripping with so much disbelief that it brings a smile to Bucky's face. Yeah, that's fair. That's what he gets for letting his anxiety ask stupid questions. "Bucky, I love you and our son more than anything else in the whole world. I haven't changed my mind about a single thing."

He feels a bit like a lovesick teenager when his heart thunders in his chest.

For as long as he can remember, that's the first time Steve's ever told him he loves him.

"I love you too," he says, and grins, sort of wanting to cry but blushing too hard and smiling too wide to let the tears come. "I don't know if I ever told you this, but I'm really glad you found us, Steve. You've always made everything you touch better, and we were no exception." He runs his hands over Steve's shoulders, drawing the man closer to him. "I'm sorry for not saying it sooner, but thank you for breaking into my apartment."

Steve laughs, giving his head a shake before pulling Bucky into a tender, chaste kiss. He cups Bucky's face with both hands and barely pulls away as he says, voice low and gentle, "I'm glad I found you too, Buck. I knew I would. I wasn't going to stop until I did." Their noses softly brush together as Steve keeps his face a hair's breadth away from his own. "But I had no idea we'd someday have this. A home. A family. That I could finally call you mine."

His thumbs rub gentle circles over his cheekbones, reverent. "I didn't even dare to let myself dream it, Bucky. And now I get to sleep holding you in my arms every night, two rooms away from our perfect son. Some days I wake up thinking it all has to be a cruel joke. That any minute, I'll get sucked back into reality, because it can't possibly be real that I get to have this life."

"I know what you mean," Bucky says, because he does. "I've had that exact same thought more times than I can count since the day Peter and I met. This kind of happiness… the warmth and intensity of it…" he swallows, lowering his gaze from Steve's searching, impossibly blue eyes. "It feels like more than I could ever deserve, so how can it possibly be real?"

Steve cups his cheeks and solemnly says, "I think we might have some self-worth issues, pal."

It shocks a laugh out of Bucky that breaks the budding tension of the moment. He shakes his head and leans into Steve a little harder, chuckling. "My therapist tells me the same thing."

"Maybe we can work on that together. What do you say?"

Bucky hums deep in his throat, his eyes slipping closed.

Together.

Yeah. Together works for him.

Once Steve's put the thought into his head, Peter is completely sold on the idea of stopping by the planetarium on their way to the ranch. Bucky can't help but tease him for being more excited about the museum than he is about getting to ride his very own horse for an entire weekend getaway, but Peter just laughs and swears that he is *very excited about the horseback riding too, Dad, cross my heart.*

Tony hadn't wanted to carpool with them, so Peter had offered to keep him company during the drive down. Bucky doesn't even feel the urge to sulk over Peter choosing not to ride with them—the quiet drive with Steve is nice, and the weight of his overnight bag's contents still looms heavily all around him, so he's actually somewhat grateful for the extra space right now.

He knows he's going to be an anxious mess until all is said and done.

And more than anything, he doesn't want Peter to suspect a thing.

Tony's car is already parked and vacant when they pull up to the museum. Bucky hesitates for way too long as Steve exits their car, his mind racing, the anxiety swelling in his gut. He should leave it. It will be *fine* here, it's not an *actual* bomb, and nothing is going to happen to it while they're in there, he *knows* that.

But somehow, the thought of leaving it in the backseat, unattended, for hours on end makes him feel sick.

It means too much to him.

So he grabs his backpack before following Steve out of the car, slinging it onto his back and hoping it doesn't make him stand out more than being seen with Iron Man and Captain America already does.

Peter doesn't question it when he sees him, and that's really all that matters to Bucky. He's already riveted to some groundbreaking feat of technological innovation, rambling back and forth with an equally-eager (though much better at hiding it) Tony. It takes the four of them a while to make it through the interactive exhibit, and even longer to follow every one of Peter's wide-eyed whims before they finally reach the planetarium.

As hard as he tries, Bucky just can't concentrate on the exhibits, bright and colorful and interesting as they are.

All he can concentrate on is the impossible weight on his back, and the carefree smile on Peter's face.

*I have to tell him,* he thinks to himself, sick with nerves. It gets worse every time he looks in Peter's direction, sees that wide, joyful smile on his adorable little face. He can't lose his composure now, not when he and Steve worked so hard on The Plan, spent hours and hours whispering conspiratorially on how to break the news.

The Plan. He needs to stick to The Plan. They're going to the ranch, the four of them, even Tony's in on the big idea. Bucky's worked too hard and planned things too carefully to screw it all up now, just because he's anxious for reasons that don't even make sense to him.

But God, it's hard to even look at Peter knowing he doesn't know.

Steve, face buried in a pamphlet about the documentary they're playing in the planetarium's theater, follows blindly behind Tony and Peter as they go through the double doors and into the dark, densely-seated room, too absorbed to notice the way Bucky is lagging behind with every step.

He only makes it to the doors before he stops. *I have to tell him.*

Fuck, he's a mess. He needs a moment, he realizes, his heart racing. Just… just a moment to himself, to calm the coiling anxiety in his gut and get his shit together. He slips away while the

other three relax into their seats, back through the theater doors and down the painted travel path, until he enters a large, dark dome.

It's startling enough that, for a moment, nothing else exists.

The room has to be almost a hundred feet across. He had thought the planetarium he took Peter to on his fifteenth birthday had been huge, and technologically impressive, but this one—it's massive, and every inch of the curved walls and ceiling are dotted with literally trillions of stars—brighter and more vibrant than any sky Bucky has ever seen, even back in Montana, in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

He can see every galaxy, every constellation, even the ones he can't name. It's overwhelming in its beauty and shocking in its sheer size. Bucky has never felt smaller, or more inconsequential, than he does standing beneath all those stars.

At least, he *did,* until a tiny hand gently cups his own, and a soft, worried voice breaks him from his thoughts. "Dad?"

Bucky whirls around, eyes wide, widening even more when they land on Peter's concerned face. "Are you okay?" he asks, quiet enough that no one else around them can hear. "I thought maybe you just went to the bathroom or something, but you didn't come back…" Peter's eyes search his own, no doubt spotting every speck of worry Bucky feels. "What's wrong?"

It's not a lie when Bucky takes a deep breath and says, "Nothing's wrong, Pete."

The boy clearly doesn't believe him. His dark gaze flickers over Bucky's face, like if he stares long enough, he'll be able to see every little thing that Bucky is trying to hide.

The concern in his voice absolutely breaks Bucky's heart.

"Then why do you look so sad?"

He can't help but laugh, the ridiculousness of the whole thing catching up to him. Sad. Peter thinks he's *sad,* on today of all days, when it couldn't be further from the actual truth.

"I wanted things to be perfect," he confesses with a sigh, a resigned smile crossing his face. Peter stares at him in confusion, clearly totally lost. "I'm sorry. The truth is, I've been wanting to turn this weekend into a make-up birthday party for you, since I wasn't here to celebrate you turning sixteen."

"Dad," Peter says, gently, "you and Pops weren't exactly subtle. I mean, you guys packed *two* full birthday cakes into the cooler before we left. I sort of figured out this was a birthday thing, like, three weeks ago."

"Yeah, okay," Bucky says, grinning in spite of himself, "maybe we weren't exactly slick with the whole birthday angle, but, I still wanted it to be a surprise. We had it all figured out, even Tony was in on it. Everything was set up to go according to The Plan, but… I can't do it like this, Peter."

Peter looks at him like he's speaking in tongues. "Can't do what like what?"

"I can't keep carrying this around, knowing you don't know about it," he says, gesturing to his backpack, which he slides off his shoulder and delicately lowers to the floor. "I wanted it to be a surprise, something I could gift you with seemingly out of nowhere, but… after everything we've been through, and everything it took to get to this point, I can't do it, Pete. I'm sorry for ruining the surprise element of this, but I can't go one more minute with you not knowing."

“Not knowing *what?*” Peter asks, confusion and fear clear as day on his face.

Bucky inhales slowly, the deep breath before the plunge, and unzips his backpack to retrieve the innocuous, immeasurably valuable envelope from inside. He hands it to Peter wordlessly, watches with rapt attention and endless fondness as the boy timidly pulls it open, hand reaching inside to grasp the single piece of laminated paper it holds.

Peter’s eyes dance quickly over the page, widening when the meaning of it finally sinks in.

A smile spreads across Bucky’s face as he gently takes the boy’s hand and says, answering him a moment later, “That you’re mine.”

The boy’s gaze flickers between Bucky’s face and the adoption certificate in his hand, speechless. He doesn’t look *upset,* not really, but the anxiety is still coursing violently through Bucky and he can’t help but ask, “Are you mad that I just went ahead and did it? That I didn’t ask you first?”

“Mad?” Peter repeats softly, like the word is alien to him. He doesn’t take his eyes off the certificate, like he’s scared the words will change if he looks away. “Does this—is this—is this real? It’s, like, it’s an actual—it’s—”

“It’s real,” Bucky says, smiling softly. “Tony helped me expedite the process. It took some legwork since he was technically already your caregiver, but… We got it all straightened out. It’s real, Peter.” He gently grabs the boy’s shoulders, squeezing reassuringly. “From now on, it won’t just be a cover when I call you my son. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, I’m your dad.”

He already was, he has been for the majority of the time they’ve been together and they both know it, but—it’s different, seeing it on paper, holding the proof right in front of them. It’s different knowing that, officially, Bucky and Peter are father and son and nothing can ever change that now.

Tears fill the boy’s eyes, but he still doesn’t look away from the piece of paper in his hands. “You’re my dad.”

“Yeah, kiddo,” Bucky says. “I’m your dad.”

Peter looks up at him, the tears falling down his cheeks.

And throws himself into Bucky’s arms.

Bucky embraces him firmly, pulls the boy flush against him and wraps him in his arms. His boy. Finally, when he says that, when he thinks it, it’s no longer sort of a lie. He never has to feel guilty about calling Peter that ever again. After nearly two years of dreaming about it, he can finally be the father he’s wanted to be to this child, that identity seen and validated by the world, even if it’s only on paper.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” Bucky says, arms tight around the boy’s back, hand gently cupping the back of Peter’s head. “After the application was approved, it was so hard to remember what the hell I was waiting for. I just wanted to tell you. I wanted you to know that now, there’s not a chance of anyone ever trying to separate us.” He presses the side of his face against Peter’s hair, hugs him tighter when the boy sobs. “You’re mine. You’re my kid, Peter.”

“Thank you,” Peter says, clutching onto him for all he’s worth. “Thank you. Thank you, Dad. F-for wanting me. For s-staying with me, like you said you would. For keeping your promise.” He buries his face in Bucky’s shoulder, muffling his soft little voice against his jacket. “Thank you for being my Dad.”

Bucky lets his own tears fall as he holds his son tighter. “It’s the best thing that ever happened to me, kiddo. You don’t need to be scared anymore, okay? You’re home.” He pulls away slightly, gently presses their foreheads together. “You’re home.”

Peter takes a shaky, watery breath, but nods in agreement, wiping his wet face on his sleeves as they pull away from each other. He hasn’t let go of his adoption certificate, and Bucky has a feeling the boy will refuse if he offers to take it, so Bucky doesn’t say anything, just quietly waits for his son—God, *his son* —to compose himself beneath the worried, watchful gazes of the other tourists milling about around them.

Two of those tourists, Bucky realizes when he looks up, he recognizes. Steve is smiling at them from across the dome, hands in his pockets and expression fond. He looks soft, watching them, like he’s observing something so irreplaceable and precious, he can’t bear to interrupt it.

Tony looks a little more uncomfortable next to him, but his eyes fill with concern and affection when he spots what Peter is holding, and the way he kind of looks like he wants to grin and cry at the same time warms Bucky’s heart.

When Peter notices the two of them standing there, he gives an embarrassed little laugh and scrubs his face a bit harder with the back of his sleeve. Steve and Tony seem to take that as permission to join in, and they walk over to them, to where Bucky and Peter are standing beneath the Milky Way, at the edge of this giant black dome that somehow contains the entire universe.

*I was a billion little pieces*
*‘til you pulled me into focus,*
*Astronomy in reverse—*
*it was me who was discovered.*

*“Venus,” Sleeping At Last*

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